

AN EXAMINATION OF BULLYING WITHIN MIDDLE SCHOOL PHYSICAL
EDUCATION

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Although bullying is recognized as a serious problem among adolescents (Spriggs, Iannotti, Nansel, & Haynie, 2007), little is known about bullying within the context of physical education. Utilizing Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979) as a grounding framework, this investigation sought to explore the social-ecological factors that impact bullying within middle school physical education. Specifically, the purpose was to discover the perceptions students and teachers have about bullying in physical education, and the perceptions students have about peer and adult support pertaining to bullying. After obtaining IRB approval and participant consent, the researcher conducted direct observations of sixth grade physical education classes in one Midwestern middle school, documenting teacher and student behaviors, physical spaces, and class activities. Each physical education teacher participated in formal and informal interviews designed to explore perceptions of bullying in physical education and overall class climate. In addition, 24 students representing various dimensions of the bullying spectrum were formally and informally interviewed about their perceptions of bullying in physical education and perceived support they received from teachers, family members, and peers. Interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed using open and axial coding techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Triangulation, prolonged engagement, member checks, peer debriefing, and negative case searches were employed. The results indicate that while physical educators perceive they promote a safe class environment, students report that bullying is a common occurrence in physical education. Student participants also indicated that reporting bullying to family members, teachers, and other adults places them at risk for further harassment. Although this study provided an initial step toward understanding the social-ecological factors affecting peer harassment in physical education, additional research is warranted.

Acknowledgements

A wise and pithy young television character once said, “Now, we can do this the hard way, or . . . well, there’s just the hard way.” I won’t use a proper APA citation, but I will say that this quote came from Sarah Michelle Gellar, star of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, who knew that there are no short-cuts for the more challenging undertakings in life. Granted, she was talking about slaying a vampire, but her point remains valid. With that said, there was no easy way to tackle this dissertation. It was at times a solitary journey, especially during those early morning writing sessions at my dining room table. But those feelings of isolation were few and far between—it was mostly a journey flanked by supportive and sagacious scholars, friends, and family members.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Misery is...

Misery is when you go to school and bullies pick on you.

Misery is when you share with someone, but they don't share with you.

Misery is when bullies become friends, and friends become bullies.

Misery is when you go to school and people threaten you by telling you that they will get you after school.

Misery is when you are at breakfast recess and people push you around for no reason.

Misery is when people invite everyone but you to play tag and football.

-Written by a 10-year old male bully victim (Swearer, Grills, Haye, & Cary, 2004, p. 63)

In February of 2007, a 12-year old middle school student, Brandon Myers, took his own life. Unfortunately, his story is not unique—after enduring years of bullying from his peers, Brandon could no longer deal with the incessant taunting of his classmates (Zagier, 2008). The social pressures of middle school can lead to intolerable unpleasantness for some students. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2007), the suicide rate among persons aged 10-24 years rose 8% from 2003 to 2004, the single largest increase from 1990 to 2004 after years of steady decline. The statistics indicate that suicide is now the third leading cause of death among youth and young adults within that age bracket (CDC, 2007). These figures expose the need for experts and educational practitioners to scrutinize closely the issue of school bullying as a potential contributor to this sudden upward spike in suicide among American youth; especially given the particularly salient finding that the negative ramifications of experiencing bullying during childhood can stay with a person into their adolescent and young adult years (Olweus, 1993a).

Bullying

Bullying, as defined by Olweus (1993b), is when a student is “exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons” (p. 9). Additionally, certain elements must be present for an act to be classified as bullying: an imbalance of physical

and/or psychological power between the bully and the victim, repetition of bullying behavior, deliberate intent to cause either physical or emotional harm, and unprovoked action from the bully (Slee, 1995). Regardless of how one chooses to define bullying, it is a collection of behaviors that prevent students from achieving a sense of wellbeing.

A continuum can be used for purposes of characterizing bullying behaviors. At one end of the bullying continuum are students who are classified as bullies, or students who are the perpetrators of negative actions. At the other end are victims, or students who are the recipients of a bully's abuse. In the middle of the continuum are the bully-victims, or students who engage in both bullying and victimization behaviors (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000). Finally, also residing near the middle are the bystanders, or students who stay out of the bullying situation, for fear of becoming a target or because they feel that the victim deserves the abuse.

It is important to note that bullying includes both direct and indirect negative actions. Direct actions are overt, and include physical aggression in the form of open attacks, verbal teasing, unpleasant facial expressions, and rude gestures. Indirect actions are typically more subversive and include relational aggression such as rumor-spreading, social ostracism and exclusion (Olweus, 1993c). Evidence suggests that bullies and victims are at an increased risk for depression, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, and low self-esteem (Swearer, Grills, Haye, & Cary, 2004). Further, victims display more signs of loneliness and are more prone to suicidal ideation (Swearer, Song, Cary, Eagle, & Mickelson, 2001). Recognizing that these risks exist, it is imperative to reach out to all students to help them feel physically and emotionally safe while in school.

The opportunity for students to have a positive school experience is negatively impacted by the prevalence of bullying. For example, Nansel et al. (2001) conducted a large-scale study

of bullying behaviors among 15,686 American youth between sixth through 10th grade. They obtained data from a self-report questionnaire, the Health Behaviour of School-aged Children, that contained questions related to bullying, health behaviors, and demographic variables. The results indicate that of the total sample, 29.9% reported involvement in moderate or frequent bullying: as a bully (13%), a victim of bullying (10.6%), or both (6.3%). Additionally, Nansel et al. (2001) discovered that males both bullied others and were bullied significantly more than females, and that bullying occurred most frequently within the middle school sample.

In addition to the large-scale study conducted by Nansel et al. (2001), there is an abundance of research exploring the bullying phenomenon within general school contexts. For example, while research does support that boys are more likely to engage in physical bullying than girls (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000), scholars caution against making concrete conclusions about gender differences in bullying. Given that bullying includes relational aggression, or more covert, nonphysical, socially isolating actions, research challenges the notion that males are more aggressive (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

It has been discovered that as males and females transition from elementary to middle school, their need to separate from their parents fosters an attraction to students who display signs of independence, which includes aggressive behaviors (Bukowski, Sippola, & Newcomb, 2000). For example, students' attraction to aggressive peers increases more for girls, which is consistent with the finding that at the end of middle school, girls reported favoring aggressive boys (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001). Exploring beyond proposed differences between adolescent males and females with regard to bullying, it is important to look at the places in which these behaviors are occurring. A considerable number of studies have been conducted in general school settings, but to date, research within the context of physical education has been limited.

Bullying as it Impacts Physical Activity and Physical Education

Educators and experts would agree that there is a collective desire for students to have a positive school experience. Bullying can impact a student's ability to receive a sound general education, as well as an effective physical education. Physical education teachers should have the confidence and skills needed to help students foster a sense of personal wellbeing, not only to make their school experience more enjoyable, but to help create healthy habits across their lifespan.

Physical Activity

According to the CDC (2008), children should have sixty minutes of moderate-to-vigorous-intensity aerobic activity every day of the week—intermixing muscle and bone-strengthening activities into those blocks of time at least three days per week. Data from the CDC-sponsored survey, the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS), reports that physical inactivity may lead to a number of chronic diseases, such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis, and diabetes mellitus (CDC, 2009). Concerning the issue of obesity alone, Ogden, Flegal, Carroll, and Johnson (2002) report that the prevalence of overweight is continuing to increase among American children and adolescents, most notably within minority populations. Exploring the positive potential outcomes of exercise, Strong et al. (2005) suggest that regular physical activity among school age youth may help with regard to reduced adiposity, lower total cholesterol, improved aerobic fitness, and possibly cognitive performance. Given the YRBSS' report that only 45% of children in grades 9-12 acquire the recommended physical activity levels per week (CDC, 2009), it is imperative to reach out to students before those behaviors are solidified.

One physical space in which students may seek physical activity is on the playground. Bullying, however, during recess and possibly on the playground before or after school can be a real barrier to students' physical activity levels. For those prone to being taunted, pursuing physical activity on the playground may be too risky because it is an environment that leaves vulnerable students open to both direct and indirect attacks from their peers. In fact, when asked where they were most frequently bullied, 76% of students reported that most of the bullying had occurred on the playground (Whitney & Smith, 1993). It is possible that bullying emerges more frequently during recess for several reasons. First, students' access to a larger space may enable them to stay out of supervising range. Second, limited supervision on the playground may create an environment in which bullying can go undetected. Finally, the unstructured nature of recess may leave students visibly exposed as potential targets for a bully's abuse. When the number of supervising teachers are increased on the playground at recess, the number of bullying events decreases (Olweus, 1993b). In addition to recess and playground activities, physical education provides another venue in which students should feel safe to be physically active.

Physical Education

Physical education is a time in which students are supposed to be active. The National Association for Sport and Physical Education (2004) states, "It is the unique role of quality physical education programs to help all students develop health-related fitness, physical competence, cognitive understanding, and positive attitudes about physical activity so that they can adopt healthy and physically active lifestyles" (p. 4-5). Physical education, however, is often perceived as a space in which public humiliation is a real possibility for some students. There already exists empirical evidence that bullying occurs within physical education. For instance, Trout and Graber (2009) discovered that among a sample of overweight students, some

participants reported feeling alienated for being teased, laughed at for how they looked in their physical education uniforms, or taunted about how poorly they performed during certain class activities. Some participants even described how physical education adversely impacted their social and emotional wellbeing, fostering a strong desire to be invisible.

Expanding upon the notion of student alienation in physical education, Carlson (1995) discovered that feeling low-skilled, “on display” during certain activities, and isolated from the class at large were themes that tied alienated students together. During a qualitative exploration of low-skilled middle school students, Portman (1995) also discovered student alienation. Low-skilled students did not enjoy physical education class because they felt unsuccessful most of the time, believed that their physical education teacher and peers provided little concrete assistance with skill development, and indicated that the public nature of competitive events in physical education elicited both verbal and physical harassment from peers. Additionally, low-skilled students expressed a desire to remain relatively anonymous within the context of physical education (Portman, 1995), sitting out when embarrassed, or simply hoping no one noticed a poor execution of a particular skill. Similar to the finding by Trout and Graber (2009), marginalized students’ desire to be invisible is a salient theme that emerges within the existing research pertaining to bullying behaviors in physical education (Carlson, 1995; Portman, 1995).

Although the researchers above did not investigate bullying per se, alienation seems to be a potential correlate. Bullied students’ desire to remain anonymous or invisible during physical education class may contribute to school activity avoidance. Essentially, bullied students may elect to stay home more frequently, steering clear of situations in which they may be bullied (Salmon, James, Cassidy, & Javaloyes, 2000). If students feel marginalized in physical activity settings such as physical education, it is less likely that they will engage in recommended levels

of physical activity. For instance, based on interviews of fourth and fifth grade students, Hopple and Graham (1995) found that many students reported dodging class, feigning illness, producing a note from a parent, or avoiding school all together on days in which physical performance visibility would be high. Based on findings in the literature that demonstrate the severity of bullying (Lagerspetz, 1982; Trout & Graber, 2009), one might conclude that if students are avoiding physical, interactive engagement with other students on the playground and within physical education, they will receive lower levels of engagement in physical activity and may be less likely to be active even during times in which they are alone.

A Social-Ecological Perspective

Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979) Ecological Systems Theory (EST) places the student at the center of his or her social surroundings. The theory posits that the student is at the core of an unbreakable, interlocking social system, which includes a student's peers, family, school environment, community, and culture. More specifically, these social systems include individuals who influence the students and places where the child is an active participant, such as home and school, and other environments that may have an indirect impact on the child, such as a parent's workplace.

Given the alarming statistics surrounding school bullying within American schools, it is imperative to delve into the social-contextual factors that may be enabling these behaviors to occur. The purpose of this investigation is to discover in what physical education environments bullying behaviors are occurring, the perceptions students and physical education teachers have about bullying, and the perceptions students have about peer support and adult role-models, including teachers and family members in relation to bullying in physical education.

The results of this investigation will promote an awareness of the existence of bullying within physical education, as well as student perceptions concerning the role the physical education teacher plays with regard to bullying behavior. The research pertaining to bullying within general school contexts is prolific, but the specific context of physical education is mostly unexplored. Utilizing the EST framework in the proposed investigation (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979), individuals will be examined in relation to where they fall along the bullying continuum, as well as the overlapping influences that impact their role as bully, victim, bully-victim, or bystander. By developing a better idea of what is happening within the ecological context of physical education, teachers can begin to make the necessary adjustments to create a positive learning space for everyone. With a staggering rise in suicide rates among young people, the topic of bullying cannot be ignored. Therefore, the specific research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are student perceptions about bullying in physical education?
2. What type of support from others do students seek pertaining to bullying in physical education?
3. What are physical education teachers' perceptions about bullying in physical education?

Chapter Two: Literature Review

“The world would be a better place without you.”

-One of the last messages read by 13 year-old bully victim, Megan Meir, who ended her own life (James, 2009, p. 2)

Opening a newspaper or scrolling through the most popular online stories of the day, one may stumble upon references to the unfortunate reality of school bullying. Media exposure and national response to bullying increased significantly after the tragic school shootings at Columbine High School in 1999 (Garbarino, 2006), due in part to the perception that the shooters had been victims of peer harassment for many years. The United States Secret Service (2002) reported that two-thirds of 37 school shooters, including those at Columbine, felt “persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured” (p. 12) by peers prior to the incident. The Secret Service (2002) described that in many cases bullying was a persistent form of torment and that students’ negative experiences did play a significant role in school shootings. Although not every bullied student will become violent toward others, this information is yet another impetus for expanded research on adolescent bullying.

Given the varied definitions and measures used across research, it is difficult to determine the exact prevalence of bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Some scholars have posited that bullying affects approximately five million elementary and middle school students in the United States (Lieberman, 2001). Hoover, Oliver, and Hazler (1992) reported that 75% of students aged 12 to 18 reported being a victim of bullying at least once, with approximately 14% suffering trauma from the events. With 30% of victims aged 10 to 14 never reporting bullying episodes to a teacher or parent (Smith & Shu, 2000), one must consider these students’ overall quality of life. Even if violence toward others is an unlikely outcome for most bullying victims, many bullies

and victims have increased suicidal ideation (Kaltiala-Heino, M. Rimpela, Marttunen, A. Rimpela, & Rantanen, 1999; Carney & Merrell, 2001).

Recent media exposure has been extensive with regard to suicide ignited by bullying. One example is that of Phoebe Prince, a Massachusetts teenager who ended her life after the incessant tormenting and harassment from nine peers proved too harrowing. In fact, it is no longer uncommon to see celebrities making statements about the grim effects of bullying. Colin Farrell (2010, May 26), a well-known film actor read an eloquent statement about bullying on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* stating: “Bullying is torture, it is another betrayal of basic human decency and its scars reach way into the future of its survivors.” Not only are certain celebrities speaking out against bullying, but a media campaign targeting children and focused on school bullying was launched by the Cartoon Network in the fall of 2010 (Crary, 2010).

The overwhelming statistics surrounding school bullying indicate why it is critical for researchers to examine the social-contextual factors involved in the phenomenon. The purpose of this investigation is to (a) discover in what physical activity environments bullying behavior is occurring (i.e., the locker room, the playground, the gymnasium), (b) discover the perceptions students have about physical education and their perceived involvement in the subject matter, (c) discover how physical education teachers act as either barriers or facilitators of bullying behavior, (d) discover the perceptions students have about peer support with regard to bullying in physical education, (e) discover the perceptions students have about adult role-models, including family support, with regard to bullying in physical education, and (f) discover if there is any connection between bullying and participation in physical education.

Bullying Along a Continuum

Dan Olweus was the first researcher to systematically investigate bullying (Juvoven & Graham, 2001). His seminal work on peer harassment that began in Sweden in the early 1970's allowed researchers to refine the definition of bullying. While numerous definitions of bullying exist, most scholars agree that bullying is a subset of aggression that may lead to both physical and psychological harm (Rivers & Smith, 1994; Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999).

According to Olweus (2001), bullying can be defined as the following: "A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students" (p. 5-6). Additionally, he indicates that it is difficult for the victim to defend himself or herself.

It has been suggested that certain elements must be present for a behavior to be classified as bullying. According to Slee (1995), these elements include: an imbalance of physical and/or psychological power between the bully and the victim, repetition of bullying behavior, deliberate intent to cause either physical or emotional harm, and unprovoked action from the bully. Olweus (2001) also emphasizes that bullying is not a situation in which the teasing is done in a friendly or playful way, or when two students of equal strength quarrel or fight. Instead, there is an imbalance of power with the intent to inflict harm.

Bullying involves a person or group devaluing another to make that person or group seem superior (Hazler, 1996). It is not merely a normal part of growing up that all individuals should expect to encounter (Carney & Merrell, 2001). Bullying is a complicated phenomenon that includes both direct and indirect negative actions. Direct actions are typically more observable and include physical aggression in the form of hitting, kicking, pinching, verbal taunting, and stealing of money or other items. Indirect actions are typically more covert and include

relational aggression such as spreading rumors to a third party, intentionally damaging someone's reputation (Pellegrini & Long, 2004), and excluding another student from an activity or event (Olweus, 1991). Bullies using indirect actions may leave cruel messages for the victim to find, have a conversation just loud enough for the victim to hear, or huddle up to stare and laugh at a victim (Owens, Slee, & Shute, 2001).

Perceiving bullying and victimization as a static phenomenon rather than as a dynamic and complex set of interactions will only limit educational experts in their quest to prevent and manage bullying in schools. Researchers conceptualize bullying along a continuum (Olweus, 1994; Slee, 1995; Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999; Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000), at one end are students who are classified as bullies, or students who generate the physical and/or psychological harm of others. At the other end of the continuum are victims, or students who are the targets of unwanted negative actions. Residing near the middle of the continuum are the bully-victims, or students who engage in both bullying and victimization behaviors (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000). Finally, also residing near the middle are the bystanders, or students who are passively involved in the abuse (Hazler, 1996). It is critical to explore characteristics associated with those children who fall along the bullying continuum. The following sections will highlight common and distinguishing characteristics discovered among bullies, victims, bully-victims and bystanders.

Bullies: Characteristics

Bullies have been characterized as dominant, aggressive, and impulsive (Olweus, 1993b), typically possessing a positive attitude toward violence (Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Berts, & King, 1982). Further, bullies feel a need to be in control and feel powerful when they dominate other students. Bullies want others to perceive them as tough and dominant, and they want to avoid

becoming victims (Smith & Sharp, 1994). Whether bullies act alone, in pairs, or in small groups when tormenting others, they typically feel that it is acceptable behavior because the targeted child or group of children ‘asked’ for trouble (Ross, 1996).

Victims: Characteristics

Two distinct types of victims emerge on the bullying continuum. One is the provocative victim, otherwise known as the *bully-victim* (described in the next section). The other more common type is the submissive victim. This is a student who is characterized as quiet, shy and not likely to fight back when attacked (Olweus, 1993b; Carney & Merrell, 2001). Due to their low propensity for violence, submissive victims, or simply *victims*, will typically withdraw from a confrontation and possibly cry when harassed by other students. Additionally, male victims tend to be smaller in stature and physically weaker than their peers (Olweus, 1993b). Finally, victims tend to perceive themselves as stupid, ashamed, and unattractive, and even deserving of a bully’s attack.

Bully-victims: Characteristics

Constituting only 1/7th of all victims is the bully-victim (Olweus, 1978). The bully-victim will ignite negative social situations, thus leading to his or her own victimization. Bully-victims engage in both bullying and victimization behaviors. They are typically characterized as antagonistic, retaliatory, hyperactive, and attention-deficit (Olweus, 2001). It has been suggested that bully-victims display behavior that other students deem irritating. They have impulse-control issues and lack the social skills to respond appropriately in conflict situations. Bully-victims can inflame social situations due to their desire to use aggressive, retaliatory actions (Olweus, 2001). The bully-victim may instigate an event that leads to his or her own

victimization, and will most likely fight back when attacked (Carney & Merrell, 2001). This victim is typically among the least-liked by his or her peer group (Batsche, 1997).

Bystanders: Characteristics

Bystanders, or those students who are not the primary perpetrators or targets of bullying behaviors, constitute the largest (approximately 60-70% of students) and most overlooked group (Olweus, 1993b). The majority of research and media attention focuses on the actions of bullies and victims, even though bystanders could serve a critical role in reducing bullying behaviors (Hazler, 1996; Macklem, 2003).

Salmivalli (1999) suggested that bystanders fall into one of four categories: *assistants*, *reinforcers*, *outsiders* and *defenders*. Assistants act as supporting members of the bullying dynamic by catching or holding a victim down. Reinforcers may not have a direct physical involvement in bullying, but they give positive feedback to the bullies, thus encouraging those behaviors. Outsiders constitute the majority of bystanders—they remain away from bullying, providing support for neither the bully nor the victim. Research indicates that outsiders avoid becoming involved due to uncertainty about how to handle bullying situations, fear of becoming the next victim, or fear of exacerbating the problem (Hazler, 1996). Finally, the defenders attempt to support the victims by helping them and showing a clear disdain for bullying behavior.

Theoretical Framework

The bullying phenomenon is often impacted by more than the students involved in the bullying episode. For instance, one might wonder how the friends, teachers, and parents of an adolescent bully encourage or discourage bullying behavior. Additionally, one might investigate what type of counsel the friends, teachers, and parents of an adolescent victim provide to him or

her. Although Olweus (1993b) believes that bullies are typically physically strong and possess an antisocial personality and that victims are usually physically weak with an anxious personality, this lends one to view bullying as a static occurrence, with a focused emphasis on individual characteristics alone. Craig and Pepler (1997) stated, “In other words, the interactions of bullies and victims cannot be fully explained by merely the convergence of two personality patterns, but must be considered within a complex of interactional influences, such as the peer group and the school social system” (p. 43).

Adopting a social-ecological perspective when researching bullying creates a wider lens through which to examine this complex and dynamic phenomenon. Bronfenbrenner’s (1977, 1979) Ecological Systems Theory (EST) places the student in the center of interconnected social systems that all have direct and indirect impact on the student. Bronfenbrenner (1979) states that the ecology of human development “involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded” (p. 21). When conducting research through the lens of EST, one does not assume that a person is a *tabula rasa*, or a blank slate, on which the environment makes its impact. Instead, Bronfenbrenner suggests that there is a reciprocal influence between an individual and his or her environment. Additionally, he suggests that the environment is not limited to immediate settings, contending that interconnections exist from broader surroundings. Bronfenbrenner (1979) believes that the ecological environment can be visualized as concentric circles, each contained within the other.

Microsystem

The first system nested within EST's concentric circles is the microsystem, which is defined as "a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). A setting, as referenced in the above definition, is a place in which people can interact with others, such as a home, school, playground, or recreational center. It has been suggested that settings in which children are frequently immersed could be the most important environmental influences on their behavior (Lewin, 1943). The activities, roles and interpersonal relations serve as the foundation, or the building blocks of the microsystem. Using a school as an example, the activities would include the tasks the student sees himself or herself performing in class; the roles would include teacher and students; and interpersonal relations would include perceived interconnections between and among peers and teachers within the class.

Additionally, Bronfenbrenner (1979) stresses the word *experienced* when describing the microsystem. He takes a more phenomenological view in that he does not believe that external influences of human behavior can be described by events or conditions alone. He contends that "the scientifically relevant features of any environment include not only its objective properties but also the way in which these properties are perceived by the persons in that environment" (p. 22). When exploring bullying within the context of physical education, it will be paramount to gain insight into students' perceptions of their environment.

Mesosystem

The next system contained within EST's concentric circles is the mesosystem, which is defined as "the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates" (i.e., the interactions among two or more microsystems) (Bronfenbrenner,

1979, p. 25). An example of a mesosystem within a child's life would be the interactions and relationships that develop as parents and teachers work together to address a bullying event. Upon hearing from teachers that their child may be the victim of bullying, parents may choose to tacitly accept the bullying episode as an inevitable part of childhood, opting not to discuss the situation with their child. Alternatively, parents and teachers may work in tandem to develop a plan to help the child. There are numerous ways in which parents and teachers may interact when discussing the bullying event and all will impact the student in different ways.

Exosystem

Another system imbedded within EST's concentric circles is the exosystem, which is defined as "one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). While the possible effect of the exosystem on the participants will not be explored in this study, it is important to understand how it works. An exosystem might involve a parent who is negatively impacted by a highly stressful work environment. If a mother is distracted and anxious due to issues pertaining to her job, her awareness and reaction to the social reality of her child might be impacted. If the child has been engaging in relationally aggressive bullying, it may be handled differently due to the mother's external stressors. Even though the child is not an active participant in the mother's workplace, the child could still feel the ripple effects of the mother's anxiety.

Macrosystem

The last system nested within EST's outermost circle is the macrosystem, which is defined as "consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems (micro-, meso-, and exo-) that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with

any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26). In other words, the outermost circle in the EST diagram includes the influence of the beliefs of individuals within a culture or subculture. People do not merely exist within individual microsystems such as home and school. Those homes and schools exist within communities, which are imbedded within states or districts, which are enmeshed within countries. In a sense, belief systems and ideologies of people within a certain country or simply within one’s neighborhood impact how one experiences life. While the macrosystem will not be examined in this study, it still constitutes a key component of EST. For instance, if the majority of people within a community believe that violence is an acceptable part of life, there may be more unchecked violence and bullying within that community’s school district.

Exploring the Individual: Bullies, Victims, Bully-victims, and Bystanders

It is not only important to know some of the characteristics associated with bullies, victims, bully-victims, and bystanders, but it is critical to explore research addressing the behavior of these various groups of students. The more we understand about the potential psychosocial impact of behaviors across the bullying continuum, the more scholars and educators can help schools foster a safe environment for students.

Bullies

Bullies are those students who use both direct and indirect aggression to harass and intimidate other students. While it may seem more natural to extend support to victims of bullying, the research discussed below illustrates the need to reach out to those students who engage in bullying behaviors as well.

Negative impact. Some research suggests a lasting impact of bullying behavior from childhood to adulthood (Olweus, 1993a). For example, the stability of peer aggression was

studied longitudinally within a sample of 518 children from the age of eight through 30 (Eron, Huesmann, Dubow, Romanoff, & Yarmel, 1987). Although this study did not specifically address bullying, many items reflected examples of both direct and indirect peer harassment. Researchers found that aggression at eight years old significantly predicted certain behaviors up to 30 years old, such as: criminal convictions, spousal abuse, and the severity of physical punishment inflicted on their children.

In another longitudinal study examining bullying's extended impact, Farrington (1993) discovered that British boys who were bullies at age 14 tended to be bullies at ages 18 and 32, and tended to have children who were bullies. Farrington (1993) reported that the transmission of bullying behaviors from parents to children showed a clear intergenerational continuity of antisocial actions. With the possibility of prolonged harassment across many years and possibly many generations, it is imperative to reach out to these students while they are young.

Self-esteem and social acceptance. It has been suggested that contrary to popular myth, bullies do not have low self-esteem and are typically well-accepted by peers (Lagerspetz et al., 1982; Olweus, 1993b; Rigby & Slee, 1993). It has also been found that bullies in elementary school have been regarded as popular among their peers (Ross, 1996; Rigby & Slee, 1993), with some students describing bullies as 'crowd pleasers' (Khosropour & Walsh, 2001). In a sample of fourth through sixth grade boys, it was found that bullies were good at sports, popular and accepted by their peers, and considered 'cool' (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000).

While bullies may find peer acceptance early in life, research suggests that bullies' peer acceptance and popularity may diminish over time (Warman & Cohen, 2000). Bullies at the secondary level, for example, were identified as less popular than well-adjusted students, but more popular than victims (Lagerspetz et al., 1982). In a study examining 8,249 students aged

eight to 18, O'Moore and Kirkham (2001) found that bullies at the secondary level reported significantly lower self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy in relation to behavior, intellectual and school status, and happiness and satisfaction compared to their nonbullying peers. This suggests that perhaps the "crowd pleasing" element of peer harassment that was once admired by some students in early adolescence loses its effect as students mature.

Social intelligence. Regardless of waning status among peers in later years, researchers have found that bullies who use relational aggression, such as rumor-spreading or social exclusion, are quite socially adept. For instance, in a study of 193 students between the ages of 7-10, Sutton, Smith, and Swettenham (1999) discovered that bullies who use relational aggression are equipped with a very high level of social cognition—enough to manipulate their victims and avoid being discovered by teachers.

In a similar study, Kaukiainen et al. (1999) examined the relationships among various types of aggression, empathy and social intelligence within a sample of 526 Finnish children aged 10 to 14. Results indicated that students in each age group who reported using relational aggression as a form of bullying had significantly more social intelligence than other students. Additionally, both verbal and physical forms of aggression had almost no correlation with social intelligence, indicating those students who use more direct forms of bullying have less social perception and interpersonal awareness than those who use indirect methods of harassment (Kaukiainen et al., 1999). Finally, empathy, or sensitivity to others' feelings, was significantly negatively correlated with all types of bullying in every age category, except 12 year olds using indirect aggression. This suggests that while students might have high levels of social awareness, enough to recognize that their actions might hurt the feelings of others, they may not always care.

Depression and anxiety. Even though social intelligence might be high for some bullies, Slee (1993) reported that bullies are typically unhappy and generally dislike school. Unhappiness at school might be connected to a lack of emotional well-being among some bullies. Research findings pertaining to the relationship between bullying and depression and anxiety are varied, but do generally lead to the conclusion that there are psychosocial implications of bullying behavior.

Slee (1995) explored bullying and victimization behaviors and their relationship with depression in a sample of 353 Australian children with a mean age of 10.3 years. In addition to replicating the finding that bullies report unhappiness and dislike for school, Slee (1995) found that the tendency to bully others was significantly correlated with depression for males and females, while prosocial behaviors were not correlated with depression. While the psychologically damaging effects of prolonged victimization have been known for some time, these results illustrate that bullying may be an indicator of psychosocial maladjustment. Bullying others may be a cry for help for some students.

In another study examining the psychosocial correlates associated with bullying behavior, Swearer, Song, Cary, Eagle, and Mickleson (2001) looked at depression and anxiety in a sample of 133 middle school students. Results from survey data indicated that participants from the bully group were most likely to be depressed (42.9%) and least likely to be anxious (0%) compared to bully-victims, victims, and bystanders. Swearer et al. (2001) stated that those in the bully group were on extreme ends of the depression spectrum—bullies were either depressed, or they were not. While Swearer et al. (2001) found no relationship between bullying and anxiety, research seems to be inconsistent. For instance, Duncan (1999b) analyzed survey data from 375 seventh and eighth grade students pertaining to bullying, victimization and anxiety. Results

indicated that bullies reported similar levels of anxiety compared to victims, leading one to conclude that the potential psychological ramifications of bullying are quite complicated.

In a study exploring the relationship among bullying, depression, and anxiety, Craig (1998) administered self-report surveys to a sample of 546 students in fifth through eighth grade. Results indicated that involvement in physical, verbal and relational aggression did not significantly relate to depression. Although self-identified perpetrators of bullying behaviors did not report significant levels of depression, those students engaging in verbal and relational aggression did report significant levels of anxiety, although at much lower levels than victims. While Craig (1998) found little depression and some anxiety among self-identified bullies, enough tangible data exists that illuminate the potentially harmful consequences of bullying at all points along the spectrum.

One harmful consequence of bullying others is the possibility of increased suicidal ideation. Kaltiala-Heino et al. (1999) conducted a study examining bullying behaviors, depression and suicidal ideation among 410 Finnish adolescents aged 14-16. When depressive symptoms were added to the statistical analysis of the survey data, the highest risk for severe suicidal ideation was seen among self-identified bullies. In another study, Brunstein Klomek et al. (2007) surveyed 2342 9th through 12th graders in New York. They also found that frequent involvement in bullying others was correlated with high risks for depression and suicidal ideation, in addition to suicide attempts. These results indicate that psychological morbidity associated with peer harassment is dangerous for all students along the bullying continuum.

Anger. When conceptualizing the individual within a microsystem, many internal and external factors contribute to a student's compulsion to bully others. One possible correlate affecting a bully's sense of emotional well-being is anger. Research suggests that enhanced

anger might lead bullies to use a proactive form of aggression in order to maintain control over other students and possibly attain an elevated social standing. In a study of 558 middle school students, anger was found to be the strongest predictor of bullying behavior for both males and females (Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999). Additionally, students who reported the highest levels of anger during the fall semester increased their bullying behaviors over the academic year (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000). In-depth interviews with students have the potential to reveal that anger may stem from troubles with peers, teachers, or family members, as suggested by the tenets of EST.

Gender differences. When looking at bullying with regard to gender, many scholars contend that males engage in direct forms of bullying more frequently than females (Sharp & Smith, 1991; Salmivalli, 1999; Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000; Ma, 2002; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). Others espouse the notion that indirect bullying, in the form of relational aggression, must be taken into consideration when exploring gender differences (Swearer, Cary, Song, & Eagle, 2000). When rumor-spreading and social exclusion are included as bullying behaviors, research suggests that females are just as likely as males to engage in bullying.

Crick and Grotpeter's (1995) seminal investigation of relational aggression among 491 third through sixth grade students revealed that while the physically aggressive group consisted primarily of boys (15.6% of boys, 0.4% of girls), the relationally aggressive group consisted primarily of girls (17.4% of girls, 2.0% of boys). Crick and Grotpeter (1995) found that contrary to prior research, boys and girls bullied others at nearly the same frequency. Additionally, they found that relational aggression was correlated with peer rejection, isolation, depression, and negative self-perceptions, with girls reporting higher levels of loneliness than their nonaggressive peers. Examining indirect forms of bullying when investigating the bullying phenomenon is

critical, in that relational aggression has been connected to stable, psychosocial maladjustment that lasts beyond the school years (Crick, 1996).

In another study, Rys and Bear (1997) examined various forms of aggression and prosocial behaviors among 131 third graders and 135 sixth graders, using the same measures as Crick and Grotpeter (1995). They found that boys reported more direct forms of aggression and that girls were more prosocial. Additionally, they found that contrary to Crick and Grotpeter's (1995) finding that females reported more indirect forms of harassment than males, in fact, there were no sex differences in relational aggression. Given the varied results pertaining to gender differences in bullying behaviors, scholars contend that both males and females bully others and need to be studied further (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003; Garbarino, 2006).

Victims

While research describes the psychosocial ramifications of bullying others, victims typically suffer the most severe damage from bullying. While victims are on the opposite end of the continuum from bullies, some of the negative ramifications of bullying are the same.

Self-esteem and social acceptance. Negative self-perceptions, low self-esteem and self-blame create a vicious cycle of victimization among some students (Egan & Perry, 1998). Male and female victims fear negative perceptions from peers, thus leading to feelings of social distress and social avoidance, especially for females (Slee, 1994). The more often a student is bullied, the further his or her self-esteem drops (O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001), thus leading to even more isolation from peers. Victims are typically very lonely at school, reporting that they do not have one good friend in their class (Olweus, 1993b). Interestingly, studies have shown that when victims are given a hypothetical social problem to solve, they are able to think of good

solutions. This indicates that the problem is not related to a lack of knowledge, but to their belief that they are socially inept and deserve to be victimized (Perry, Hodges, & Egan, 2001).

Approximately 400 sixth and seventh grade students were placed into groups based on their responses to self-report and peer nomination bullying surveys (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). Participants responded to hypothetical bullying scenarios: being humiliated in the locker room and being physically threatened in the bathroom. Results indicated that victims' psychosocial maladjustment, in the form of loneliness, social anxiety, and low self-esteem, was mediated by self-blame. In other words, victims were more likely than non-victims to find fault in their own character, thus leading to the cycle of peer harassment.

Depression and anxiety. While victims struggle with their social well-being, research indicates that they also contend with a lack of healthy emotional functioning. In Slee's (1995) study examining elements of psychological well-being in Australian primary school students, victimization was significantly associated with depression and unhappiness at school for both males and females. The Depression Self Rating Scale results further indicated that the group victimized "most days or frequently" was many times more likely to report symptoms of depression compared to the rest of the sample. Results such as, "I feel like crying" (32% vs 4%); "I feel very lonely" (23% vs 6%) and "I feel so sad I can hardly stand it" (35% vs 5%) illuminate the psychologically damaging effects of prolonged victimization (Slee, 1995).

Depression among victims was also reported by Salmon, James, Cassidy, and Javaloyes (2000). They surveyed 95 adolescents who were seeking either inpatient or outpatient mental health services. Results suggested that 35% of students seeking inpatient mental health treatment and 27% of students seeking outpatient health services treatment reported bullying victimization as an important factor for seeking professional help. Swearer et al. (2001) also reported

depression associated with victimization. They collected survey data pertaining to depression and anxiety among middle school students who fell along the bullying continuum. Results indicated that 13.5% of victims reported depression, while 19.2% reported anxiety. Clearly, the negative ramifications of sustained victimization can significantly impact students' overall mental well-being.

Adolescents struggling to contend with depression and anxiety may seek drastic solutions. Research suggests that prolonged depression can lead to suicidal ideation in some victims (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 1999). While the highest risk for depression and suicidal ideation was found among bullies, victims were also at-risk. Among females specifically, severe suicidal ideation was associated with frequent victimization. One study found that within a sample of 124 adolescents who had attempted suicide, nearly 25% reported that they were the victims of prolonged bullying for at least one year (Davies & Cunningham, 1999). It is clear that for some students involved in the bullying phenomenon, the prolonged strain on their psychological well-being can have devastating consequences.

School avoidance. For some students attending school is a terrifying notion. It is logical that many victims of bullying will go to great lengths to avoid the place in which constant harassment is a regular part of the day. Research shows a connection between victimization and staying home from school. For instance, within a sample of frequently absent students, 15% stated that bullying was their primary reason for avoiding school (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). Similarly, researchers analyzed multiple waves of data among a sample of 1,422 students aged nine to 16 (Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2003). They found that approximately one-third of students identified bullying as a critical reason for skipping school. Students who were identified as avoiding school due to social anxiety were 6.8 times more likely than other students

to be truant. Additionally, these students were more likely to have fears and worries, sleep difficulties, and somatic complaints, such as headaches and stomachaches.

It is possible that the increase in school activity avoidance may hold a relationship with the increased number of physical health complaints lodged by bullied students (Williams, Chambers, Logan, & Robinson, 1996). Within a sample of 2,962 students with a mean age of nine years, those children who were more frequently bullied at school reported bed-wetting, sleeping difficulties, headaches and abdominal pain. It is difficult to say if the physical symptoms reported by victims are a byproduct of anxiety connected to bullying, or a fabricated means in which to stay away from an environment in which they feel afraid.

Even if victims choose to attend school, bullying has been connected to a lack of concentration in classes. Boulton, Trueman, and Murray (2008) surveyed 485 10 and 11 year-old students in the United Kingdom in relation to self- and peer-nominated victimization, fear of future victimization, and perceived disrupted classroom concentration. Results indicated that more than one in 20 surveyed students reported high levels of disrupted classroom concentration and fear of future verbal and physical attacks. These results indicate that school avoidance and disrupted classroom concentration due to victimization are not only dangerous for students' overall well-being, but for their ability to seek a positive educational experience.

Bully-victims

Bully-victims, or those students who engage in both bullying and victimization behaviors, are also at-risk for developing psychological maladjustment. The research described below will illustrate how bully-victims are a unique group of students who may require specialized support and intervention efforts.

Empathy. Bully-victims, or those students who engage in both bullying and victimization behaviors, are considered one of the most troubled groups of students along the continuum (Macklem, 2003). Bully-victims' ability to care and feel empathy for other students might be connected to their antisocial behaviors. In one of the first studies specifically examining bullying behavior and empathy, Endresen and Olweus (2001) surveyed four large samples of Norwegian students aged 13 to 16. Questions measuring empathic responses included items such as, "When I see a girl who is hurt, I wish to help her." Results indicated that a self-reported positive attitude toward bullying mediated the connection between empathy and the frequency of bullying others. For example, those students with low levels of empathic concern were more likely to bully others more frequently and to perceive bullying as a positive phenomenon.

Although Endresen and Olweus (2001) did not tease out results pertaining to bully-victims specifically, their study laid the foundation for further investigations of bullying and empathy. In a study examining 268 middle school students' attitudes about their feelings, their friends, and aggression, Espelage, Mebane, and Adams (2004) found that bully-victims reported the lowest amount of concern for others and were significantly less likely to be involved with caring acts. These results suggest that bully-victims as a subtype along the bullying continuum are a high-risk group and may need specialized interventions.

Depression and anxiety. Research indicates that bully-victims are at risk for psychosocial maladjustment in the form of depression and anxiety. Juvonen, Graham, and Schuster (2003) surveyed 1,985 sixth grade students using peer nominations of bullying and social standing, self-reported psychological distress, and teacher nominations of interpersonal competence. Results suggested that bully-victims reported high levels of depression and

loneliness, and average levels of social anxiety. Additionally, peers reported socially ostracizing bully-victims more than all other classmates. Teachers reported bully-victims as most likely to be disengaged from school and to display more conduct problems than other students. Bully-victims seem to have the “worst of both worlds” (Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003), in that peers and teachers rank them as a troubled and socially rejected group of students.

Swearer et al. (2001) also found evidence of psychosocial maladjustment among bully-victims. Researchers conducted a five-year longitudinal study of two cohorts entering the sixth grade (N = 133). Statistical analyses of survey results indicated that 30% of the bully-victims were depressed. Additionally, while Juvonen, Graham, and Schuster (2003) found average levels of anxiety among bully-victims, Swearer et al. (2001) found that bully-victims and victims scored highest on the total anxiety score, 17.5% and 19.2%, respectively. These results support earlier findings that indicated bully-victims reported higher levels of anxiety than bullies or victims alone (Duncan, 1999b), suggesting they are a high-risk subset of students along the bullying continuum.

It is possible that students who are high-risk for psychological difficulties may manifest their maladjustment in life-threatening ways. In a study looking at bullying, depression, and suicidality among high school students, Brunstein Klomek et al. (2007) found that boys who were frequent bully-victims were more likely to be depressed and have suicidal ideation than boys who did not engage in bullying behaviors. Girls who were frequent bully-victims were 32 times more likely to be depressed and 10-12 times more likely to have suicidal ideation or attempt suicide compared with non-bullying girls (Brunstein Klomek et al., 2007). In another study looking at bullying and depression, researchers found that bully-victims were approximately 12 times more likely to have severe suicidal ideation compared with other

students (Kaltiala-Heino, 1999). These troubling results indicate that bully-victims are a unique subset of students who may require special resources for improving psychological and social well-being.

Bystanders

Bystanders, or those students who have a more peripheral role in the bullying dynamic, could be targeted in bullying prevention efforts. If bystanders felt confident to reach out to victims or discourage a bully from harming another student, school personnel would have another powerful weapon to curtail the bullying epidemic (Hazler, 1996).

Reactions to victims. Research indicates that most early adolescents lack concern and sympathy for the pain and suffering of victims (Perry, Willard, & Perry, 1990; Hoover, Oliver, & Hazler, 1992). Not only do victims tend to blame themselves for their own victimization, but the majority of their peers blame them, too (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). In a study of 207 middle and high school students in the Midwest, participants reported that bullying teaches victims about unacceptable behaviors, bullying is warranted because victims bring it on themselves, and bullying makes victims tougher (Oliver, Hoover, & Hazler, 1994). With that said, bystanders are not merely passive witnesses to peer harassment, they are active and involved participants in the social dynamic of bullying (Twemlow, Fonagy, & Sacco, 2004). If most students perceive that bullying is a normal, and oftentimes acceptable part of school life, then some bystanders are complicit in the bullying phenomenon.

Oh and Hazler (2009) identified and surveyed a sample of 298 college students who were bystanders during middle or high school. The majority self-identified as outsiders (59%), indicating they neither helped the bullies nor the victims. Another group of students identified as defenders (31%), or protectors of victims. Additionally, 8% of those surveyed reported that they

were reinforcers, or students who supported bullying with positive comments or gestures of acceptance. Finally, only 2% of students surveyed reported that they were assistants, or students who helped bullies with actions such as catching a victim who attempted to run away. Results indicated that bystander behavior was predicted by gender, social status, relationship with those involved in bullying, and any personal experience as either a bully or bully-victim. Survey data indicated that females and those with higher social standing were more likely to react more positively to victims; those with a close relationship with bullies were more likely to react negatively to victims; and those with past experience as either a bully or bully-victim were more likely to act as assistants or reinforcers (Oh & Hazler, 2009). Bystanders are an overlooked subset of students along the bullying continuum. This research suggests that bystander status is a complicated phenomenon and more research is needed to discover what role these students play with regard to peer harassment.

Exploring Peers, Family, and School

The tenets of EST espouse the notion that people's actions and experiences are governed by more than individual characteristics. While research has given us startling, yet sometimes contradictory evidence characterizing a typical bully, victim, bully-victim, or bystander, one must acknowledge the complexity of the bullying phenomenon. Exploring the bullying phenomenon through an EST framework enables us to look beyond individual characteristics into the potentially powerful influences of a student's peers, family and school.

Peers

Friendships as a microsystem provide a bidirectional means of learning social skills, developing a sense of one's self-esteem, learning how to lean on others for emotional support,

and practicing for future relationships (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999). These microsystems impact bullies and victims in different ways.

Social support. In one study, researchers examined the influence of social networks on the behavior of identified bullies. In a sample of 422 middle school students from a Midwestern school district, Espelage, Holt, and Henkel (2003) surveyed students at multiple times over the course of an academic year. They discovered that both males and females created social networks with students who bullied at similar frequencies. Additionally, those students who socialized with students who bullied others increased in the amount of self-reported bullying over the school year (2003). This suggests that students who perceive bullying positively may gravitate toward one another, looking to create a microsystem that endorses peer harassment.

The friendship microsystem not only impacts students who engage in bullying behaviors, but also those who are victimized within school. Research suggests that peer support can mediate some of the loneliness reported by victimized students. Skinner and Kochenderfer-Ladd's (2000) sample of fifth grade students completed a survey pertaining to loneliness, victimization frequency, and use of peer support. Results indicated that children who were victimized more frequently reported higher levels of loneliness. Looking specifically at the more frequently victimized students, those who coped via internal means (i.e., worrying, feeling sorry for themselves, etc.), without seeking peer support, reported higher levels of loneliness than those who sought assistance from friends.

Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, and Bukowski (1999) examined the potential protective function that friendships may provide for victims. Participating teachers completed behavior surveys pertaining to their students, while 533 fourth and fifth grade Canadian students completed surveys pertaining to loneliness, victimization, and the existence and protective quality of their

friendships. Results indicated that friendship can serve as a buffer against the negative experiences of victimized students. While having a best friend did lead to decreases in victimization over the year, the perceived quality of that friendship was paramount. If victims reported a high level of protection from their best friends, the victims' internalizing problems (i.e., anxiety, low self-esteem, etc.) were attenuated. Conversely, if victims perceived a low level of protection from friends, internalizing problems were exacerbated (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999). These findings indicate that while friendships can have an ameliorating effect on victimized students, the quality of those friendships is critical.

Family

While the structure and stability of families are varied with regard to socioeconomic status and parenting styles, all families serve an influential role in the development of children (Macklem, 2003). In particular, families provide children with information about how to interact with others.

Perceptions. The family microsystem can be a powerful influence on students across the bullying continuum, regardless of racial background. Based on national data from the Health Behavior in School-Aged Children's survey, demographic factors and perceived family relations were analyzed for 11,033 students in sixth through 10th grade (Spriggs, Iannotti, Nansel, & Haynie, 2007). Results indicated that white bullies and victims and black bully-victims reported low parental school involvement. Additionally, white and black bullies, black and Hispanic victims, and Hispanic bully-victims reported more difficulty communicating with their parents. These results suggest that regardless of racial background, students who engaged in bullying or victimization behaviors perceive a lack of school support and communication with parental figures.

Conceptualizing the family dynamic through the lens of EST, one must consider that individual perception is paramount. Specifically, how a child perceives his or her role within the family, the quality or lack of warmth received from family members, or the effectiveness of parental disciplinary strategies all contribute to his or her reciprocal dynamic within that family microsystem. For instance, some research suggests that various perceived familial factors contributed to boys' bullying, specifically: mother's lack of warmth, mother's permissiveness of aggression, and parents' use of power-assertive methods (Olweus, 1980). Conversely, father's lack of warmth, and parental overprotectiveness contributed to boys' victimization.

In another study, Bowers, Smith, and Binney (1994) built individual perception into their examination of 193 middle school students in England. Valid and reliable surveys pertaining to bullying and families were analyzed from four subgroups: bullies, victims, bully-victims, and controls. Results indicated that the total number of family members was not significant across groups, but bullies and bully-victims were significantly likely to have no father at home (50%, 45%, respectively) compared to victims and controls (15% each). Additionally, bullies perceived a lack of cohesion and warmth with siblings, parents, and other family members. Bully-victims seemed to be the most troubled group with regard to family dynamic in that they reported significantly higher scores for paternal and maternal neglect than control children. Finally, evidence suggests that victims might be enmeshed in overly intense or over-involved family systems (Bowers, Smith, & Binney, 1994). In other words, parents who are perceived as overprotective might restrict their children's ability to interact socially with their peers. These results indicate that bullying prevention efforts should bring parents and guardians into the process. It is possible that helping parents learn healthy ways in which to be involved and communicative with their children could help prevent peer harassment.

Abuse. Looking beyond the perception of familial warmth and into abuse, Duncan (1999a) conducted a retrospective study of 210 college freshmen in order to gauge the relationship between parental maltreatment and victimization. Results from survey data indicated that victims reported a significantly higher frequency of both physical and emotional abuse by their parents than did nonvictims, with the majority of maltreatment coming from mothers (Duncan, 1999a).

Similarly, within a sample of 558 middle school students, Espelage, Bosworth, and Simon (2000) found that the single best predictor for the absence of bullying behavior among students, even after controlling for perception of peer influence on negative behavior, was having positive adult role models. Those students who were sometimes or more frequently spanked, slapped, or hit and those who frequently spent time without supervising adults, were significantly more likely to engage in bullying behavior. The family microsystem is a powerful influence on student behavior. If students perceive that their homes are unsafe spaces in which abuse and neglect are regular occurrences, it is certainly possible that their interactions with peers will be impacted by this reality.

School

The school as a social institution is charged with two responsibilities by society: to protect and educate children (McQuillan, 1998). Yet, bullying is a ubiquitous phenomenon in schools today (Graham & Juvonen, 2001). Providing a sound and safe educational experience for all students is a difficult undertaking when some perceive school as a threatening and dangerous place to be. More research within the American school system is needed in order to alleviate this epidemic of peer harassment. Bronfenbrenner (1979) posited that besides the family home, the school is another comprehensive context for examining children's

development. He believed that the school environment should be studied as part of the microsystem in which students are embedded.

Climate. Some researchers contend that the prevalence of bullying has more to do with school climate than it does with the behavior of students (Brady, 2001). The school climate includes discipline policies and how they are executed, physical structures and grounds, resources, communication, support systems, and school morale. When a school climate fosters teacher and student bullying as normal behavior, it negatively impacts the school atmosphere (Macklem, 2003). The prevalence of bullying is affected by the number of supervising teachers in certain areas of the school, such as the playground, bathrooms, and corridors. In one school, it might be an accepted norm that students are prone to being physically victimized while changing clothes in the locker room, while another school trains teachers to supervise these areas to prevent unwanted harassment.

Promoting a positive school climate has been shown to steer students away from bullying behaviors. One study revealed that several school factors were critical in impacting the behavior of secondary students. Schools that emphasized academic achievement and promoted positive attitudes toward school, helped students avoid associating with deviant peers (Crosnoe, Erickson, & Dornbusch, 2002). Another study found that there was less bullying at schools characterized as having a positive disciplinary climate and strong parental involvement in sixth grade. Less bullying was also reported at schools with high academic emphasis in eighth grade (Ma, 2002). These results suggest that a school's climate can foster an environment in which students feel safe to learn, or an environment in which peer harassment is a norm.

Size. Evidence is varied concerning how school size impacts the prevalence of bullying behaviors in schools. For instance, some research indicates that secondary schools with fewer

than 500 students have a better chance than larger schools of minimizing bullying due to greater social control and student monitoring by teachers (Garbarino, 2001). Alternatively, in a study looking at middle school characteristics associated with bullying, Ma (2002) researched 148 schools with a sixth grade population and 92 schools with an eighth grade population in New Brunswick, Canada. He discovered that contrary to evidence suggesting that school size is not related to bullying (Olweus, 1993b; Lagerspetz et al., 1982; Whitney & Smith, 1993), in fact, more bullying occurs in smaller schools (Ma, 2002). Regardless of mixed results in the literature, bullying is a phenomenon that impacts students within schools of all sizes.

Teacher awareness. Not only do students sometimes foster an environment that supports bullying behaviors, but some research suggests that teachers in general school contexts do very little to stop bullying, as reported by both bullies and victims (Olweus, 1993b; Craig & Pepler, 1998). Some researchers assert that teachers have difficulty identifying bullying behaviors among students (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000). Bullying might be such a pervasive part of a school's culture that teachers are desensitized when they see such actions. If harassment is a school norm, teachers and other supervising adults may cease reacting to bullying behaviors.

Researchers have found that middle school teachers are not as adept as elementary school teachers in identifying bullies and victims (Macklem, 2003). Middle school teachers identify approximately half the bullies and victims that students identify. This may be explained by the limited contact between middle school teachers and individual students and the increase in more indirect forms of bullying at this level. Macklem (2003) also suggests that teachers rate students based on their relationship with them. Students who engage in bullying behaviors might be outgoing and pleasant in class, making it difficult for teachers to identify them as bullies.

Teacher beliefs. In a study examining teacher beliefs, researchers analyzed survey data from a sample of 138 British pre-school, elementary and secondary teachers to discover their attitudes toward bullying (Boulton, 1997). Results indicated that overall, teachers did not express positive attitudes toward bullying, with female teachers reporting more negative attitudes toward bullying. A significant correlation was discovered between length of teaching service and attitude toward victims—the greater the duration of service, the more negative was the reported attitude toward victims, indicating that perhaps over time, teachers become desensitized to bullying (Boulton, 1997).

Interestingly, even though almost all teachers reported feeling negatively about bullying, they were not synchronous when classifying bullying actions. When asked to identify behaviors they perceived as bullying, the majority indicated that physical attacks, verbal threats, and forcing others to do something against their will all constituted bullying. However, approximately 25% of the sample did not report name calling, spreading nasty rumors, stealing items, social exclusion, or laughing at someone as bullying behaviors (Boulton, 1997). Even though not all teachers report a consistent understanding of what constitutes bullying behaviors, the majority of teachers believe that bullying is something they should strive to prevent in their classrooms. Yet, the overall sample reported a low level of confidence for handling bullying in the classroom, and most indicated they would like more training on the prevention and management of bullying.

Bullying within Physical Activity Contexts: Recess and Physical Education

Examining peer harassment using an EST framework, it is imperative to explore the various contexts in which bullying occurs. It has been suggested that different types of bullying, both direct and indirect, and the context in which it happens all contribute to the varied

experiences of victimized students. If a student is verbally tormented about his or her intellectual abilities, he or she may dread attending school. Similarly, if a student is ridiculed for being clumsy or inept while on the playground or in physical education class, he or she may be averse to engaging in physical activities, games, or sports (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Ladd, 2001). Given that 20% of American children are obese (CDC, 2010), we cannot afford to enable two physical activity contexts, recess and physical education, to remain spaces in which some students feel harassed and threatened. If one of the paramount goals of physical education is to encourage all children, including those who are battling obesity, to explore physical activity across a lifetime, physical education must be perceived as a place of encouragement and safety from aggressive peers.

Some research indicates that physical characteristics, such as overweight, are not the primary impetus for bullying (Olweus, 1993b). Yet, once a perceived physical defect is discovered by the bully, that perceived aberration may be used against the victim (Besag, 1989). For instance, in a study of 5,749 Canadian students, the prevalence of victims increased with increasing Body Mass Index (BMI) in 11-12 year-old boys, 13-14 year-old girls, and 15-16 year-old girls (Janssen, Craig, Boyce, & Pickett, 2004). Specifically, boys and girls with BMI scores indicating either overweight or obese status were significantly more likely to be victims of verbal bullying (being called names, made fun of, or teased) and relational aggression than their normal weight peers. Additionally, girls with high BMI scores also saw an increase in physical bullying.

In another study, researchers interviewed 30 extremely overweight nine and 10 year-old British students to gain insight into the challenges they face within school (Fox & Edmunds, 2000). The majority of students interviewed reported that name-calling was a pervasive part of the day, especially when walking to school, at recess and in class. Direct forms of bullying

extended into the physical education context where compulsory, physical performance is public, and harassment when changing clothes in the locker room is a perceived norm. With regard to a heightened sense of social comparison in physical education, one bullied student stated: “When I’m running ‘round and everybody runs past and shouts ‘fatty’ and all that, it makes me feel bad” (Fox & Edmunds, 2000, p. 178). Unfortunately, interviewed students reported that physical education teachers did very little to stop peer harassment. If we are to attain our goals of reducing the amount of childhood obesity, all children need to feel safeguarded in their pursuance of physical activity.

Recess

One context that lends itself to physical activity opportunities for children is the school playground. Evidence suggests that the playground may be one of the physical spaces in which children bully others frequently (Price & Dodge, 1989; Rivers & Smith, 1994; Slee, 1995). Whitney and Smith (1993) collected survey data from 6,758 students aged 8-16 from 24 British schools. Among the measures studied, the researchers sought to discover where bullying most often occurs within the school context. Students in the junior/middle grades reported that the majority of bullying happens on the playground.

Research suggests that one possible explanation for increased episodes of bullying during recess is the number of supervising teachers on the playground. In a study exploring recess behaviors of children, there was a clear negative correlation between relative “teacher density” during recess and the number of bullying events (Olweus, 1993b). In other words, the more teachers supervising on the playground, the lower number of bullying episodes observed.

In another study based on 52 hours worth of videotaped recess sessions at a Canadian school, researchers observed over 400 episodes of physical bullying (Marano, 1995). Their

observations did not include indirect forms of bullying, which could have impacted their data significantly (Hoover, Oliver, & Hazler, 1992). Similarly, based on naturalistic observations of children during recess, Craig and Pepler (1998) videotaped and audiotaped 41 aggressive and 41 socially competent children (mean age = 9.9 years), as nominated by peers and teachers. Results indicated there were 314 bullying episodes observed during 48 hours of recess (6.5 per hour). The majority of bullying episodes (80%) were direct (verbal and physical), followed by indirect (18%), with the remaining episodes (2%) involving both. Interestingly, both aggressive and socially competent children were involved in a similar frequency of bullying and victimization behaviors. The majority of episodes (84%) were in overt locations, while some (16%) were hidden from peers and adults. Finally, teachers intervened in only 4% of observed bullying episodes (Craig & Pepler, 1998), indicating that most of peer harassment in this particular physical activity context goes unchecked.

Physical Education

Physical education should be an environment in which all students feel comfortable and safe to explore physical activity. Unfortunately, the few studies pertaining to peer harassment in physical education indicate that this is not always the case. While there is a plethora of literature examining bullying behaviors in various school contexts, the physical education context is underexplored. The microsystem that exists in physical education class is a unique entity that does not necessarily mimic the dynamic in the classroom setting. It is a space in which students are not confined to desks, where they are sometimes in apparel that draws attention to their physiques, and where physical performance in a potentially overcrowded gymnasium breeds an environment ripe for bullying. At this time, not enough research exists to explain where physical

education teachers and the microsystem in which they instruct fit into the larger school picture with regard to adolescent bullying.

Although not specifically referencing bullying, Griffin's (1985) exploration of middle school boys' participation styles in physical education revealed some startling trends that helped pave the way for early research into the topic of peer harassment. As identified by interviewed students and teachers, male physical education students were given certain labels, such as "machos" and "wimps." After three months of observing machos within the context of sport education units, Griffin (1985) described them as highly skilled, enthusiastic about physical education, and incredibly confrontational with others. They laughed at students who fell down and made mistakes, they physically and psychologically battered some lower-skilled students (wimps) repeatedly, calling them "soft, fairies, and faggots," and they in a sense, were protected by physical education instructors who when asked about one victim in particular, stated that the student "brings it on himself" (1985, p. 107).

Griffin's (1984) exploration of the participation patterns of middle school female physical education students revealed that "femme fatales" were consistent disciplinary problems, most likely due to their observed disdain for physical education. These aggressive females laughed and made fun of other students. In one example, they were observed teasing an overweight student while he sat on the sidelines. While giggling they stated, "I love you. Will you marry me?" (Griffin, 1984, p. 34). Low-skilled or unpopular students were frequently observed trying to avoid garnering attention from other students and teachers. In fact, some students, the "system beaters," avoided activity entirely by frequently presenting notes from parents or physicians excusing them from participation in physical education class. It is not certain if these students had genuine ailments hindering their ability to participate, or if they were

simply avoiding an environment they perceived as hostile. This notion of desiring to remain invisible, and perhaps free of physical badgering and emotional torture is a theme that emerges in more than one study pertaining to physical education.

During a qualitative investigation of low-skilled sixth graders, interviewed students expressed a need to remain invisible during physical education class (Portman, 1995). Low-skilled students reported a lack of enjoyment of physical education due to adverse criticism from other students and teachers. Participating students reacted to public harassment from peers by ignoring negative comments, striking back at instigators, or removing themselves from the situation by sitting out of the competition (Portman, 1995).

In another study examining student perception of physical education, surveys pertaining to perceived alienation were administered to a sample of 105 middle school students (Carlson, 1995). Results indicated that approximately 21% of the surveyed students reported feeling alienated in physical education class. Follow-up interview results suggested that some of those alienated students felt isolated from their peers, reporting that verbal harassment was an inevitable part of physical education. Some expressed that in order to avoid feelings of alienation and embarrassment, they would stay home from school on days in which physical education class was held. Interviewed students and physical education teachers even alluded to students skipping physical education class in a form of self-banishment (Carlson, 1995).

Trout and Graber (2009) conducted formal interviews with seven female and five male high school students whose body mass index was at or greater than the age- and gender-specific 85th percentile of the CDC's growth charts. While Olweus (1993b) reported that external deviations such as obesity play a much smaller role in the origin of victimization problems than previously assumed, context most likely plays a critical role. Based on analysis of the data,

Trout and Graber (2009) discovered that overweight students perceived aspects of physical education to be of little benefit, they desired to become invisible, and some even became acclimated to teasing. Additionally, students reported that negative experiences were linked with inappropriate teaching practices, running was perceived as physical and emotional torture, and fitness tests threatened students' invisibility.

The notion of wanting to remain invisible is a particularly salient theme within Trout and Graber's (2009) findings. Feeling vulnerable in physical education uniforms, especially during swimming units, led students to hear comments such as "fat ass" and "Shamu [the whale]." Not only did running and fitness testing units threaten overweight students' desire to stay invisible, but it provided a catalyst for more harassment from both peers and physical education instructors. Interviewed students reported evidence of inappropriate teaching practices, such as: forcing the entire class to run more if a single student slowed down his or her pace during a timed mile run, allowing the more dominant athletes to choose teams, and encouraging overweight students to sit out during competitive events. All of these reported occurrences fostered a toxic environment for students in physical education class.

Elements of pervading social toxicity in physical education class were also witnessed in another qualitative investigation. Based on observations and interview data of a sample of middle school students, Smith and Goc Karp (1996) found that groups of students with the most social power used both direct and indirect marginalization tactics to exclude various students in physical education class. For instance, the dominant boys used ridicule and name-calling to dissuade outsiders from joining their group. When those attempts were ignored, they employed a variety of overtly physical actions, such as pushing, tripping, or aggressively intimidating students during competitive events. The dominant girls used more subtle tactics to discourage

marginalized students from joining their group. The girls would form a seemingly impenetrable circle with their shoulders touching and their backs to everyone in the class, completely ignoring those who attempted to breach those physical lines. When unwanted students tried to cross the social threshold, the dominant girls would use verbal rebukes and name-calling to ensure the security of their group boundaries (Smith & Goc Karp, 1996).

Not only were the dominant peer groups involved in the social ostracism of various students, but the physical education teachers had a distinct role in enabling these behaviors to occur. Smith and Goc Karp (1996) found that physical education teachers ignored the exclusionary tactics of students, sometimes overtly participating in the marginalization of unpopular students. It was observed that when a student approached the teacher for help, he became the object of the teacher's disapproval. When interviewed, the teachers blamed marginal students for their social status, stating that those students chose to isolate themselves from other students. Additionally, when the physical setting changed from the gymnasium to a bus during field trips to a bowling alley, researchers noted that the teachers sat at the front of the bus, ignoring that some students were refused seats, pushed, pushed onto other students, and one student was scratched by an open paper clip (Smith & Goc Karp, 1996).

Inappropriate teaching practices add yet another layer to the notion of bullying. In a qualitative investigation exploring fear and disengagement in physical education, Ennis et al. (1997) found that students would rather not participate in physical education class than be embarrassed, humiliated, or harassed. Teachers relied on verbal abuse, profanity, and punitive measures such as sending students to "the hole," a damp, dark room attached to the locker room if they failed to dress for class or displayed uncooperative behavior. Similarly, based on interview data from a socially and physically diverse sample of 20 high school seniors pertaining

to their K-12 physical education experiences, Kollen (1983) discovered that some students described physical education as an unsafe environment; an arena riddled with embarrassing situations, public humiliation, teacher anger, forced displays of performance when students felt incompetent, and feelings of vulnerability.

Feeling vulnerable and exposed to public ridicule in a psychologically unsafe space is a particularly salient theme in another study of physical education. Morrow and Gill (2003) found that of their 77 participants, one-third of self-reported heterosexual students and nearly all self-reported gay students found that their physical education teachers did very little to promote a safe environment for students. One student wrote in his survey that “picking the ‘faggot’ last” was a commonly heard phrase in his middle and high school physical education class (Morrow & Gill, 2003, p. 212). Interestingly, most teachers (84%) within a sample of 82 respondents reported that they always or often create a safe space for all students. However, over half never or rarely handle homophobic behavior in their physical education classes. There is an obvious disconnect between what physical education teachers perceive is a “safe space” and what is actually happening, as reported by themselves and students.

In the first study looking explicitly at bullying within the context of physical education, some interesting results were discovered. In a sample of 496 middle school students, it was found that only 4% of those surveyed perceive that they are laughed at and not wanted on teams occasionally or often during physical education (O’Connor & Espelage, in progress). While not an overwhelming percentage, it still indicates that some students may perceive physical education as a place where direct and indirect harassment occur. On a positive note, a high percentage of students reported never hearing aggressive (63.1%) or mean comments (45.7%) during physical education class (O’Connor & Espelage, in progress). With a limited amount of

data pertaining to bullying in physical education, it is not yet clear what type of peer harassment is occurring and the type of perpetrators and victims involved. More research is needed to determine if students perceive they are targeted for being low-skilled, overweight, gay, or simply different than the average adolescent.

This investigation, which is grounded in EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979), seeks to explore the social-contextual factors involved in the bullying experiences of sixth grade physical education students. Students identified as bullies, victims, bully-victims, and bystanders will be observed and interviewed pertaining to their perceived involvement in physical education class and the type of peer and adult support they receive.

The specific research questions guided this study were:

1. What are student perceptions about bullying in physical education?
2. What type of support from others do students seek pertaining to bullying in physical education?
3. What are physical education teachers' perceptions of bullying in physical education?

Chapter Three: Method

“Prepare to be changed. Looking deeply at other people’s lives will force you to look deeply at yourself.” -One of the top ten pieces of advice for graduate students considering a qualitative dissertation (Patton, 2002, p. 35)

Given the potential impact of bullying on children’s physical and mental wellbeing, it is understandable why bullying has become a point of interest within society and among scholars (Ttofi & Farrington, 2008). While bullying has been explored extensively in general school contexts, few studies in sport pedagogy have examined the phenomenon of bullying within physical education. Accordingly, the primary purpose of this qualitative investigation was to discover student and teacher perceptions about bullying in physical education through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s (1977, 1979) Ecological Systems Theory (EST). The specific research questions that guided this investigation were:

1. What are student perceptions about bullying in physical education?
2. What type of support from others do students seek pertaining to bullying in physical education?
3. What are physical education teachers’ perceptions about bullying in physical education?

Observations of and interviews with middle school students and physical education teachers provided insight into the experiences of bullies, victims, bully-victims and bystanders. It is hoped that this investigation, which was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, will provide scholarly support for pedagogy specialists seeking to make physical education a positive and safe learning environment for all students.

A Qualitative Investigation

Qualitative inquiry has been described as all types of social research that aim at understanding the meaning of human action (Schwandt, 2007). In order to search effectively for meaning, scholars contend that there are “people-oriented mandates” unique to qualitative inquiry that cannot be ignored (Patton, 2002, p. 28). For instance, a qualitative researcher must get close enough to the people under investigation in order to truly understand the context. The researcher must also attempt to accurately capture what people say by documenting direct quotations. Further, qualitative research must include in-depth descriptions of people, interactions, and settings. Finally, one must consider that in qualitative investigations, the researcher is the instrument attempting to understand the context, capturing quotations, and providing rich descriptions of the people and environment under investigation (Patton, 2002). Therefore, the credibility of qualitative methods relies heavily on the skill and competence of the researcher. Some scholars argue that relying upon a human instrument could pose a threat to the internal validity of qualitative inquiry. As Guba and Lincoln (1981) state, however, “This loss in rigor is more than offset by the flexibility, insight, and ability to build on tacit knowledge that is the peculiar province of the human instrument” (p. 113).

Qualitative scholars explore people and events in natural settings to discover what “real life” is like (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10). There are specific characteristics that constitute a comprehensive framework for qualitative researchers seeking to investigate people and events (Patton, 2002). One characteristic relevant to qualitative design is that the research is *naturalistic* (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Rather than attempting to control or predict outcomes, the qualitative researcher employs a discovery-oriented approach and allows the phenomenon to emerge naturally. Another feature of qualitative inquiry is *emergent design*

flexibility, which means that a naturalistic study design unfolds throughout the course of the investigation (Patton, 2002). Finally, an additional characteristic is *purposeful sampling*, or selecting cases to investigate that are information rich (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002).

Qualitative data, in the form of interview transcripts, direct observations, and document analysis, takes researchers into the context under investigation in order to tell a story (Patton, 2002). As Lincoln and Guba (1985) have suggested, qualitative data should yield a detailed, thick description of the phenomenon studied. In order to generate a rich description of the phenomenon, the researcher often conducts fieldwork, the primary activity of qualitative inquiry. By “going into the field” the researcher has direct, *personal experience and engagement* with the people and the situation being studied.

Patton (2002) discusses that while social scientists have been warned to maintain objectivity during qualitative investigations, he suggests that complete detachment can limit one’s openness to truth-seeking. While Patton (2002) emphasizes that a qualitative researcher avoid complete detachment, he also recognizes that one should strive for a middle ground, which he describes as *empathic neutrality*.

Identification of Participants

Four physical education teachers and 24 sixth grade students aged 10-12 from Eastbourne Middle School (fictitious name) who were identified as either bullies (n = 6), victims (n = 6), bully-victims (n = 6), or bystanders (n = 6) participated in this study. Student participants were selected based on two methods. First, physical education teachers were asked to read descriptions of behaviors associated with bullies, victims, bully-victims, and bystanders. They were then asked to examine sixth grade physical education rosters and identify students who, based on their observations during the 2010-2011 school year, fit those descriptions. Second,

once a master list of student recommendations was provided by all four physical education teachers, the list was cross-referenced against survey data collected in the fall of 2010 by Dr. Dorothy Espelage's research team. The University of Illinois and Wichita State Student Behavior Survey (Espelage & Holt, 2001) was distributed to sixth graders during the baseline phase of Dr. Espelage's, *Second Step Program*, a multi-year, middle school bullying prevention program. This valid and reliable instrument was used to assess (a) the frequency of specific types of bullying behaviors; (b) victimization; (c) bystander witnessing; (d) sexual violence, harassment, and coercion; and (e) homophobia among middle school students.

For the purposes of this investigation, physical education teacher nominations coupled with student responses to the survey were used to identify where students fell along the bullying continuum as bullies, victims, bully-victims, and bystanders. When teacher nominations were cross-referenced with survey data, twenty of the twenty-four participant identifications were in agreement. With regard to the four participants who did not have alignment with teacher nominations and survey data, the researcher defaulted to teacher nominations because students sometimes have difficulty self-identifying how others perceive that they behave.

Patton (2002) believes that there are no rules for sample size in a qualitative investigation. The researcher should determine and justify the sample size based on what the researcher wants to know, the purpose of the investigation, what will be useful and credible, and what can be done with available time and resources. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend leaving sample size open until the researcher has reached redundancy with regard to emergent information. Investigating four physical education teachers and 24 sixth grade students allowed the researcher to reach redundancy.

Sixth grade students were used for this sample due to the prevalence of bullying behavior within middle school. Though bullying occurs at all ages, including adulthood, the peak period has generally been recognized to be between the ages of 9-15 (Hazler, 1996), with middle school consistently highlighted as the worst time for bullying (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009; Nansel et al., 2001; Duncan, 1999a).

Specifically, an increase in aggressive behavior is seen among boys during sixth grade, as they transition from elementary to middle school (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001). Ma (2002) also found a statistically significant difference in the number of bullying episodes in a sample of sixth graders in comparison to a sample of eighth graders. During these formative years in early adolescence, children are at a critical time in their social development in which it is paramount to fit in with their peers (Carney & Merrell, 2001). If acceptance or an improved social standing can be gained by humiliating someone else, bullying may be perceived as attractive to some middle school students (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001).

In addition to being a critical, socially formative time, middle school is an important time for students to establish healthy lifestyle behaviors pertaining to wellbeing. It has been noted that during this time, physical activity trends decline (Kimm et al., 2002). Little research exists, however, and currently much more is needed pertaining to physical activity trends within the middle school population (Sallis et al., 2003). It is critical for researchers to explore what role bullying plays with regard to physical activity patterns.

School Context

According to the Illinois State Board of Education (2010), the student population of the Eastbourne Middle School district is 6,199 students: 47.5% white, 40.5% black, 6.7% Hispanic, 1% Asian, 0.1% Native American, and 4.2% multiracial. Additionally, 71% of students in this

school district are identified as low-income, indicating that students are from families receiving public aid, living in institutions for neglected or delinquent children, being supported in foster homes with public funds, or receiving free or reduced-price lunches (ISBE, 2010).

Interviews

This study employed formal and informal interview strategies. Formal interviews utilized two approaches: the standardized open-ended interview and the interview guide (Patton, 2002). The standardized open-ended interview format required deliberate and complete phrasing of each question prior to the interview. Scripting the interview in advance was useful in that it allowed colleagues and committee members to edit and refine questions. The interview was also very focused in order for time to be used as efficiently as possible. Efficiency was paramount given the fixed amount of time to speak with middle school participants during the school day. Finally, the streamlined and consistent design of questions facilitated analysis once all interviews were complete.

Due to the sensitive nature of bullying, the interview guide approach was also used in this study (Patton, 2002). Even though interview guides were scripted, the researcher was free to probe with unscripted questions based on participant responses. Scholars recommend starting with an open-ended question to elicit a spontaneous narrative, followed by more direct questions to help fill in the gaps (Steward & Steward, 1996; Eder & Fingerson, 2002).

In addition to formal interviews, the informal conversational interview technique was also employed (Patton, 2002). As the most unstructured approach to interviewing, this technique allowed the researcher to ask questions that emerged from the immediate context. Informal conversations took place in the gymnasium before, during, and after physical education classes, and in the school hallways en route to the formal interview. The researcher asked questions that

seemed contextually relevant at the time. Patton (2002) notes that the strength of this method lies in its flexibility, spontaneity, and the possibility of personalizing a conversation with a participant. Given the casual nature of conversational interviewing, the researcher took field notes after the exchanges, rather than taking live notes or tape recording conversations.

Interviews with Students

A study comparing various data collection methods used with children aged nine, 11, 13 and 15 years found that interviews were the most effective way to gain a deeper insight into students' perceptions of bullying (Ahmad & Smith, 1990). Interviews in the present study afforded an opportunity to discover contextually relevant details pertaining to student bullying experiences. Students were formally interviewed on one occasion for approximately 20-40 minutes (Appendix A). Each participant was asked the same set of 24 questions guided by the tenets of EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). Interview questions focused on (a) perceptions of bullying in physical education, (b) support from physical education teachers pertaining to bullying, (c) support from family members and other adults pertaining to bullying, and (d) support from peers pertaining to bullying. Students were also asked follow-up questions based on their responses. In addition to the 23 questions that required a verbal response, students were also asked to examine a map of all areas associated with physical education. They were then asked to use a marker to identify in which spaces the most bullying occurs (Astor, Benbenishy, & Meyer, 2004).

In order to effectively illuminate bullying within physical education, the researcher carefully considered language when developing the interview guide for student participants. Interview questions were written with language geared toward sixth grade participants, without use of sophisticated terminology and research jargon. Additionally, the interview guide was

pilot tested on a ten-year old female and eleven-year old male unassociated with Eastbourne Middle School.

The researcher carefully considered how to employ the use of the word “bullying” when conducting interviews. Given the saturation and negative connotation of the word within various media outlets, the researcher deliberately avoided using the word bullying within student interviews. Since bullying is negatively perceived and currently a controversial topic within schools the specific use of the word bullying was avoided until the end of the interview (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999). Instead, students were asked questions about specific bullying behaviors, such as pushing and name-calling. The researcher hoped that deliberate phrasing of questions without use of the word bullying would encourage students to speak more openly about their experiences and perceptions. Therefore, the first 21 of the 24 interview guide questions did not include the word bullying or its variations.

In order to elicit authentic perceptions of bullying within physical education, as well as the associated emotions connected to their experiences, the researcher reassured students that interview responses were confidential (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999). Additionally, the researcher remained neutral without displaying emotions in reaction to student responses.

Interviews with Physical Education Teachers

Physical education teachers from Eastbourne Middle School were formally interviewed on two occasions for approximately 30-50 minutes. During the first interview, each participant was asked the same set of questions (Appendix B). Interview questions focused on their perceptions of (a) bullying within physical education, (b) supervision of locker rooms, (c) physical education class climate, and (d) students who fell along the bullying continuum. The second interview allowed the participants to contribute additional insights and clarify responses

from the first interview (Appendix C). Interview questions were carefully phrased in order to make the participants feel comfortable to discuss their perceptions.

Observations

The researcher observed 20 physical education classes throughout the spring semester, taking field notes based on teacher and student behaviors, physical spaces, and other contextually relevant phenomena that contributed to the physical education microsystem. Patton (2002) suggests that one purpose of observational data is to describe the setting, the activities within the setting, and the people involved in order for readers to understand the context.

In addition to describing the setting, activities and people, the researcher used direct observation in order to triangulate data. Making direct observations in the field provided the researcher with the opportunity to witness events, patterns, and trends that participants may not have reported for a variety of reasons. Therefore, another way the investigator obtained a comprehensive perspective of this particular microsystem was through direct observation.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews with students and teachers and field notes from observations constituted the core methods of this project. All open-ended interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Notes taken during formal or informal interviews supplemented transcripts and helped with the interpretation of results. All forms of data were analyzed by open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Open coding is described as the “process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). Open coding was used to analyze interview transcripts and field notes by reviewing each multiple times and documenting possible interpretations. While open coding is the process of categorizing and organizing data, axial coding is the process of relating

codes to each other (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During the axial coding phase, the researcher systematically developed subcategories and examined possible interactions among categories and subcategories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Coded data were analyzed both inductively and deductively throughout the duration of this project. Inductive analysis, which involves searching for patterns, themes and categories within one's data, was employed initially (Patton, 2002). Inductive analysis involved discovering perspectives and characteristics of the participants without predetermining themes and patterns prior to data collection. The researcher used exploration and discovery while analyzing data in order to identify patterns and themes relevant to the purpose of the investigation.

Data were also examined deductively to affirm the appropriateness of the inductive analysis. Deductive analysis involved analyzing data based on an identified theoretical framework (Patton, 2002). This process included carefully scrutinizing negative cases and re-examining data to make sure identified themes were authentic. Deductive analysis also helped the researcher to discover the degree to which the data fit into an EST framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). Data analysis utilized a constant-comparative process whereby data were continuously revisited. Themes were identified, tested, verified and re-verified throughout the investigation (Patton, 2002).

Establishing Credibility and Trustworthiness

The following sections discuss ways in which the researcher ensured the credibility and trustworthiness of the data. Establishing credibility, which is the qualitative version of internal validity, authenticated the investigation by making certain that sound measures were taken to discover truth within the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) contend that trustworthiness involves

persuading the audience, including the researcher, that the inquiry is worthy of attention and the results can be trusted.

Prolonged Engagement

Schwandt (2007) suggests that prolonged engagement requires immersing oneself in the participants' world in order to observe, reflect, and interpret contextual events. Further, it helps a researcher to earn participant trust and develop empathy for those studied. Beginning in March 2011, the researcher attended nearly every sixth grade physical education class until the end of the semester. Mr. Valley, one of the physical education teachers who participated in this investigation, indicated that students acclimated to the researcher's presence by stating, "The kids have really—their demeanor hasn't changed at all with you sitting in there. Basically, they're still doing the same things." Mr. Valley's statement provides support for the notion that prolonged engagement can help scholars seek credibility and truth.

Peer Debriefing

Peer debriefing involves a process of sharing data, ideas, and results with a neutral peer "in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). The researcher asked a colleague familiar with qualitative research to assume the role of "devil's advocate" to review the data in order to probe for researcher biases and clarify interpretations.

Negative Case Analysis

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe negative case analysis as refining a hypothesis until it accounts for every known case without exception. While some scholars suggest that researchers must attempt to refine until there are zero negative cases, others find this to be an unrealistic, if

not impossible task (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Regardless, the process of scrutinizing negative cases helped the researcher revisit data and continuously check that emergent themes were authentic.

Member Checks

Lincoln and Guba (1985) contend that the most critical technique for establishing credibility is through member checks, or testing data interpretations with the participants. It is crucial for participants to have a chance to react to and correct the researcher's interpretations of interview data. The researcher selected three key student participants with whom she discussed initial themes and patterns noted within the data. Students had an opportunity to refute researcher claims and offer any additional insights and perspectives concerning bullying within physical education. The adult participants interviewed for this study were given copies of the transcripts, in addition to initial analyses of all coded data, in order to clarify responses and offer additional insights.

Triangulation

Patton (2002) suggests that triangulation not only provides diverse ways of examining the same phenomenon, but it adds to credibility by building confidence in the conclusions drawn. Of the types of triangulation that can help verify and validate qualitative analysis, this study employed source triangulation.

Source triangulation involved cross-checking the consistency of information by comparing and contrasting data from different sources. In this study, source triangulation was employed by comparing and contrasting the following: (a) student and teacher responses to interview questions, (b) student responses against each other, and (c) student and teacher responses to interview questions with observational data.

Establishing Transferability

Transferability in qualitative inquiry is comparable to external validity in quantitative research. While a quantitative scholar would seek a precise statement about external validity, typically in the form of statistical analysis, a qualitative researcher can only provide a description thick and rich enough for another scholar to decide if a transfer of results is a possibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The qualitative investigator is responsible for providing a wide range of information so that another researcher can determine if two contexts are congruent enough for transferability of working hypotheses.

Establishing Dependability and Confirmability

While transferability is similar to external validity in quantitative inquiry, dependability is a way in which to check for reliability, or study quality. In addition, a qualitative researcher will attempt to establish confirmability, which is an attempt at neutrality and research objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher employed three techniques to establish dependability and confirmability: maintenance of investigator logs, an expert audit review, and a statement of personal bias.

Investigator Logs

The first technique designed to ensure dependability and confirmability of qualitative research was through the maintenance of three types of investigator logs: method, theoretical, and observational. Rigorous maintenance of investigator logs provided a means to revisit and revise steps of the methodological process, examine emerging themes, and document field notes.

Method log. The method log provided a daily overview of the schedule and logistics of the study and a journal in which methodological decisions and rationales were recorded.

Decisions pertaining to interview guide details, such as the addition or removal of questions, were also documented in the method log.

Theoretical log. In addition to the method log, the investigator maintained a theoretical log, documenting participants' perceptions and experiences, and noting emergent patterns and themes. On more than one occasion the investigator employed member checking with key participants to discuss their perceptions of emergent themes in relation to the theoretical framework. The maintenance of the theoretical log began at the study's inception and continued throughout the course of the investigation.

Observational log. The observational log was the tool used to maintain rigorous field notes when conducting direct observations of the physical education setting. The observational log contained perceptions of student and teacher participants as they interacted within the physical education context, in addition to detailed descriptions of physical spaces, such as the gymnasium, locker rooms, and the outdoor area.

Expert Audit Review

In addition to maintaining investigator logs, the researcher participated in an expert audit review. Members of a doctoral committee can ascertain the quality of data collection and analysis, increasing dependability and confirmability. Regular meetings and exchanges with the graduate advisor and periodic meetings with doctoral committee members provided an ongoing forum for expert audit reviews.

Investigator Bias

Every researcher brings preconceptions to the phenomenon under investigation, regardless of methods used. Ultimately, the trustworthiness of the data is linked to the demonstrated competence of the investigating scholar. Therefore, it was important for me to

examine my own personal bias. As a result, the statement below was written prior to data collection.

I am a 33 year-old female graduate student from Champaign, Illinois. When I reflect upon my childhood experiences in physical education, I was a bystander. I remember students being targeted for lack of athletic prowess, being overweight, or simply being different than the average student. More importantly, I remember doing absolutely nothing about it. Therefore, when considering my personal biases, I would be remiss if I did not admit that I carry a compassion for bullying victims that I did not possess as a child.

As a researcher I expect to see a connection between student perceptions of bullying and physical activity engagement in physical education. For instance, if a student perceives that he or she is a frequent victim of bullying within physical education, I expect that he or she will report less class participation and a general dislike of physical education and the teacher. Male bullies will report enjoyment of physical education, especially if they perceive themselves as athletically gifted. Female bullies will report a dislike for physical education, regardless of athletic ability. Bully-victims and bystanders, regardless of gender, will report mixed feelings about physical education.

I expect that physical education teachers will express that they maintain a positive educational climate. They will perceive that they adequately supervise locker rooms, promote physical activity engagement to all students, and handle bullying episodes appropriately. I expect that direct observations of the physical education setting will expose some inconsistencies between teacher responses to interview questions and what is observed. Class procedures, physical spaces and teacher actions may present an illuminating perspective on this particular middle school physical education microsystem.

Chapter Four: Results

Bullying is a phenomenon impacting students within a variety of educational settings (Macklem, 2003). It is not always a one-on-one interaction between a bully and a victim. Rather, bullying often involves complex interactions among multiple people within a particular microsystem. The purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions students and teachers have about bullying in physical education, and the perceptions students have about peer and adult support pertaining to bullying in physical education. The specific research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are student perceptions about bullying in physical education?
2. What type of support from others do students seek pertaining to bullying in physical education?
3. What are physical education teachers' perceptions about bullying in physical education?

In order to qualitatively explore from a theoretical perspective participants' perceptions about bullying and the contextual factors within a middle school physical education setting that contribute to bullying, ecological systems theory (EST) (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979) was selected to ground the investigation. After a basic overview of the school program, the results are organized into two primary sections. Each describes the various themes and subthemes that emerged from participant interviews and direct observations.

Overview of the Physical Education Program

The two sixth grade physical education classes at Eastbourne Middle School (EMS) met five days per week for 50 minutes. Students were allotted three minutes to change into their physical education attire at the beginning of class and three minutes to change back at

the end. After students were dressed, they sat on benches in the locker room until physical education teachers directed them to the gym. Once in the gymnasium, students sat in pre-assigned rows for attendance purposes prior to the start of the lesson.

The sixth period class was taught by all four physical education teachers, Mr. Valley, Mrs. Morris, Mrs. Westcott, and Mrs. Tillman, and contained 106 students (54 males, 52 females). The seventh period class was taught by three physical education teachers, Mr. Valley, Mrs. Morris, and Mrs. Tillman, and contained 73 students (39 males, 34 females).

Given the large size of the classes, most days of the week one teacher escorted approximately 25 students assigned to him or her to the fitness room where they could work individually on treadmills, stair masters, and weight lifting machines. The rest of the class participated in that day's activity by remaining with the teachers who were co-teaching the lesson or by subdividing into smaller groups, with each teacher instructing a select number of students. On most Thursday afternoons, sixth graders participated in the mile run. If they did not finish within the time allotted, they were sometimes mandated to run again during another class period. Every Friday at EMS was "Dodgeball Friday." As the name indicates, students participated in some variation of dodgeball within the gymnasium. On the other days of the week, curricular units and activities included: (a) "Eclipse Ball", (b) badminton, (c) rollerskating, (d) team-building, (e) "Rocks" (a variation of "Capture the Flag"), (f) kickball, and (g) softball.

Physical Education Teachers

Mr. Valley was a 52 year-old Caucasian male who had been teaching at EMS for 24 years and was currently the department head. He had one year of teaching experience at another school prior to starting at EMS. Mrs. Morris was a 32 year-old Caucasian female

who had just started teaching physical education at EMS in January of 2011 after teaching in the western part of the United States. Mrs. Westcott was a 39 year-old Caucasian female who had been teaching physical education and health at EMS for six years after teaching for approximately 10 years in other Midwestern school districts. Finally, Mrs. Tillman was a 51 year-old Caucasian female who had been teaching at EMS for four years after teaching physical education for 11 years within another Midwestern district.

Gymnasium

The gymnasium at EMS contained a hardwood basketball court with two main hoops and four additional hoops along the sides. The lighting in the gymnasium was dim, with fluorescent bulbs partially illuminating the space. Two sets of bleachers lined the north wall. Banners of team records and flags from past championships hung from the ceiling in addition to signs encouraging EMS school spirit. Centrally located on the south wall was a large sign listing the set of rules governing EMS: be responsible, be safe, be ready, and be respectful.

Locker Rooms

The girls' locker room at EMS contained an office that accommodated one physical education teacher, a middle space with three benches, six rows with 70 small lockers per row, a bathroom area with two stalls and sinks, and three nooks, which were unused shower areas and storage spaces. The boys' locker room contained an office that accommodated one teacher, a middle space with three benches, six rows with 70 lockers per row, an upright extension with a few additional lockers, a bathroom area with two urinals, one stall and two sinks, and two nooks, which were an unused shower area and storage space.

Outdoor Area

Weather permitting, classes were held in the outdoor area behind the school. The grassy space was large enough to measure off a loop in which students ran two laps to reach a mile. The grassy area was also used to play softball and was expansive enough for multiple games to occur. In addition to the grassy space, an unused parking lot behind the school was used to play kickball.

Part I: Students

Twenty-four sixth grade students (six bullies, six victims, six bully-victims, and six bystanders) were formally interviewed on one occasion for approximately 20-40 minutes. Below are the 10 themes and 23 subthemes that emerged from interview transcriptions and direct observations of students. Quotes are identified by the pseudonym of the participant and their status along the bullying continuum (bully, victim, bully-victim, or bystander).

Perceived Differences Trigger Bullying

Students overwhelmingly expressed that perceived differences ignite bullying episodes in physical education. Specifically, they revealed that primary triggers are related to appearance, weakness, disability, and socially inappropriate behavior.

Appearance. Appearance, in the form of clothing, size (whether too heavy, thin, tall, or short), and hygiene, was the most commonly cited reason for students to be bullied in physical education. When students were asked to describe what type of students are teased or harassed the most during physical education, the majority referenced characteristics pertaining to appearance. For example, Angie stated, “Mostly the ones that ain’t tall . . . Cause I think it’s cause the way they look . . .” (victim). Beth affirmed this perception: “Like, they’ll make fun of them because of the way they are like, maybe they’re short or like that—but they can’t help that. I feel sorry for them” (victim).

While Angie and Beth conveyed that a student's height can impact their victimization, most students revealed that general appearance, hygiene, and weight ignited bullying. Kate emphasized that people are bullied because of appearance: "... People are talkin' about peoples' outfits and stuff" (victim). Emma perceived that her classmates bully her because of hair color. She stated, "My classmates, sometimes they don't like me because I'm a redhead" (bully-victim). Roxie reported that students are bullied because of a lack of proper hygiene: "Like sometimes they be made fun of because they stink" (bully). Finally, Jenny, who indicated that she has been bullied for being too thin, reported that overweight students are the primary bullying targets. She said, "Like, the fat kids" (bully-victim).

Weakness. Although appearance was the most commonly cited reason for students to be victimized in physical education, perceived weakness was a close second. When asked what type of student is harassed the most during physical education, Louis stated:

The weakest. It's like, it's like life. I mean, the weak are killed by the strong. It's like the animals. The strong ones take down the weak ones, the weak ones are there . . .

Yeah, the weak ones, the nerds, all them, they're the ones who get harassed . . . Me, everybody knows pretty much that I'm not one of the ones that fight back . . . I'm one of the ones who just take the pain. (victim)

While Louis' statement reflected his perception that bullying is comparable to survival of the fittest within the animal kingdom, other students echoed the sentiment without such a direct comparison. Emma stated, "Because sometimes when we get picked on, we're like the weakest, they always say that we're the weakest" (bully-victim). Thomas confirmed this notion by providing an example of what bullies sometimes say to weaker students: "Ya'll scared and ya'll weak" (bully). Mary also alluded to the idea that weaker students are targeted in physical

education because they do not throw the ball hard enough during dodgeball. “. . . And they throw the ball just like, okay—that’s the other team and this is us. They just [throw] the ball and they right here, it just land right there” (bystander).

Val emphasized that not only are students targeted for their perceived weakness, but for their lack of retaliation against their perpetrators:

The people that just stand there and don’t do anything, and they’re quiet and just lets (sic) the ball hit them . . . *Interviewer: Why do you think that students are mean to them? . . .*

Because those people can’t like, fight for themselves and stand up for themselves, so they go do it to them instead of people who know how to fight, and know how to stand up for themselves. (bully-victim)

Disability. Although participants reported that appearance and perceived weakness are the two most common reasons for students to be bullied in physical education, disability was also a catalyst that gave some students an excuse to bully. This was evidenced when the investigator observed a verbal interaction that occurred between a female student and an overweight, special needs female as they emerged from the locker room. Field notes stated that the special needs student was “visibly distressed by the exchange.” In an informal interview with the teacher afterward, Mrs. Morris revealed that the first female was demanding money from the special needs student. When the victim reported the event to Mrs. Morris, the victim stated that she felt “twisted in knots” because she fears telling students that she cannot give her money away. Mrs. Morris mentioned to the investigator that taking money from special needs, or “weaker” students, was a new and prevalent phenomenon among sixth grade girls.

In addition to observational evidence, data from student transcriptions also revealed that students with disabilities are sometimes harassed during physical education. Sasha stated:

The ones, the ones that's like in different classes that like, I don't know how to put it—like they call it L.D. classes or something like that . . . *Interviewer: What kinds of things do people say to them?* 'You're ugly, you can't do it', all that kind of stuff . . . If like if one of the L.D. stink, they'll say, 'you stink,' and something and then it's always after the class, sometimes before. (bully)

Chris also perceived that “the disability kids” are often bullied during physical education due to their behavior. He stated, “Because the way they act sometimes, like if they got ADHD and they're always moving, always playing around and getting on your nerves, they call them names and stuff” (bully).

Socially inappropriate behavior. While the majority of participants reported that students should never be bullied, seven students, including three victims, reported that there are situations when a student deserves to be harassed because of his or her actions. Participants reported that behavior deemed socially inappropriate is another reason students are targeted during class. For example, James stated:

Because they act weird. *Interviewer: Explain that.* Like they will be like all talking and trying to step on your shoes and people don't like that. Like when you buy new shoes and they stepped on them. *Interviewer: On purpose?* Yeah, and that's—everybody thinks it's so bad when they start talking about them and they keep talking about them after they quit, then they start doing something, then they act like bullying is so bad, and it is, but like what's in the wrong? (bully)

Joey concurred with the idea that bullying is sometimes warranted when a student's actions lead to undesirable consequences for others:

There's this like little kid, he's like this tall and everybody makes fun of him cause he just looks like immature, he acts immature, and like one day, he stole somebody's shoe and hid it so like the entire period of dodgeball, we didn't get to play cause he wouldn't get up and go get it. (bystander)

Bullying Tactics

Perceived differences with regard to appearance, weakness, disability, and behavior are reasons students are bullied within physical education. The data also suggest that the most frequent harassment tactics utilized against students are verbal harassment, intimidation, physical attacks, and laughter.

Verbal harassment. Participants overwhelmingly identified verbal bullying as the primary mode of peer harassment during physical education. Examples provided by students and from field notes pertained to name-calling, threats, and taunting.

Angie revealed that she is verbally teased during physical education for her performance during dodgeball activities. She stated, "I'm not real good at doing it and people make fun of me . . . [they say] that I suck at throwing and stuff like that" (victim). Other students affirmed that verbal harassment is common in physical education:

They say, 'Have you ever heard of clothes and shoes' and stuff like that. 'Comb your hair!' . . . Like this girl named Julia—they always be mean to her and ask her if she ever heard of a perm and stuff like that. *Interviewer: What does she do when people say that kind of stuff?* She cries. (Alice, bully)

"They be callin' him girly stuff because, cause he got long hair . . ." (Fi, bystander).

"They talk about her hair cause it's like an afro and they talk about it and—I don't know what they say but she always comes back crying . . ." (Amanda, bystander).

Some participants reported that verbal harassment occurs for no specific reason during physical education. Trey revealed that a pair of students tormented another male sitting on a bench in the locker room. He stated, “It was like cussing at him and like, ‘you stupid’ and like, ‘you’re retarded’ and all that stuff” (victim). Sasha also discussed that verbal taunting occurs in the locker room, and that she has been the perpetrator of such events. She stated, “. . . this little girl, she was by me in the locker room and then she kept on looking at me so I said, ‘Move.’ I called her ‘lesbian’ and then . . . she just went into another room” (bully).

Comments such as: “You’re retarded,” “You’re ugly,” and “I’m going to beat your ugly ass” were heard during classes. Although these statements were made within audible range of physical education teachers, they were ignored.

Girl packs. Evidence indicated that groups of girls, or “girl packs,” are the primary perpetrators of verbal harassment in physical education. There were numerous references made to the girl pack as a group that stands against the back walls of the gymnasium, verbally bullying other students. For example, Kate stated:

They talk about people’s hair, clothes, and how they smell—but maybe they don’t got no water, maybe no soap and stuff like that . . . they do it like in a group. They just stand in the back. They don’t do nothing. (victim)

Joey echoed: “Girls are really mean. Like, I’ve seen them pick on other girls for like no exact reason at all—they’re just like making fun of them and they’re just putting them down” (bystander).

Mary reported that a female bully, Alice, a participant in this investigation, started bullying another student in the locker room. Once the harassment began, other females affiliated

in the same girl pack with Alice became involved in the event, making it difficult for teachers to respond:

There was this girl, her name was Alice, and she was being mean to this girl named Doris—she was talking a lot of stuff to her and the teachers, they really don't do nothing cause all the girls, they be like on one circle and all the girls be screaming and yelling . . . (bystander)

Intimidation. While 79 references were made in relation to verbal bullying, 51 were made about intimidation. Specifically, participants indicated that bullies use the threat of fighting to intimidate other students. For example, when someone is on a bully's radar, fights are often planned for the locker room even if the victim does not want to engage in a physical altercation. Fi, a student identified by teachers as a bystander, was reportedly experiencing increased harassment from her peers. Field notes indicated that she appeared visibly terrified to go into the locker room before class. In order to avoid entering, she asked the interviewer if she could participate in her interview that day instead of the following week. Field notes further revealed that Fi's physical education teacher, Mrs. Morris, stated, "She's scared because a girl who just returned from suspension said that she was going to get 'treated.'" During the formal interview with Fi, she disclosed that a female bully had threatened to "treat," or physically harm her. Fi stated, "Cause like today, this one girl said that she was gonna fight me cause she thought I was talking about her—that's why I wanted to come here [to be interviewed]."

Similar to Fi, these students also discussed how bullies use the threat of fighting to intimidate them during physical education. Emma, a bully-victim, stated:

They say, ‘Wherever you came from before you came here, go back there, stay there, don’t come back and if we see you here again, we’re gonna fight you. We’re gonna make sure no teachers are around, we’re gonna make sure everybody laughs at you’ . . .

Sam, a bystander, described another episode of intimidation:

He got mad because I kept getting them out in the game . . . He came to me and said, ‘I want to fight you because you kept on getting me out.’ *Interviewer: What did you say?* I didn’t say nothing. *Interviewer: Did you want to tell the teacher?* Uh-uh. *Interviewer: Why not?* Because I can handle myself.

Physical attacks. Physical attacks were referenced 34 times by students representing the full range of the bullying continuum. Angie discussed that she and her friends are physically bullied often during physical education.

This one time when we were running the mile, this girl, she didn’t do nothing, and this girl came up behind her, pulled her hair down, got her on the ground—started hitting her and calling her the ‘b’ word. (victim)

John also perceived that he is frequently bullied during physical education, with verbal harassment escalating into physical attacks. He stated, “. . . they started calling me gay and pushing me up on the locker, and started trying to shove me around” (victim).

Field notes indicated that while two males were waiting to participate, they began to repeatedly hit and kick another male in the genital area. The victim was visibly upset and temporarily moved to another area of the gym. When the victim attempted to return to his spot along the wall, he was physically attacked again by the two males. Field notes also revealed that a male student slapped another male on the back of his neck. This was not a playful exchange between friends, but a physical assault against a student who was visibly distressed. The teacher

and student participants described how neck slapping was a new and common bullying phenomenon among sixth grade males. Chris reported that he and his friend were involved in such an event: “My friend hit this boy on the back of the neck and we got in trouble...He [the victim] got mad and started crying” (bully). Tim stated, “Sometimes in PE, some of the kids gets in people’s faces and smack them on the back of the neck” (bully-victim). Neil said, “They try to smack it real hard so that it will leave hand prints” (bystander).

Laughter. Laughter was cited as the fourth most frequently employed bullying tactic. Based on field notes and student transcriptions, evidence indicated that laughter typically occurred at another person’s expense. For example, being hit in the face by a dodgeball and performing poorly during class were identified as reasons why students are laughed at during physical education. Neil (bystander) indicated that it is typically “the slow ones” who are most frequently victimized. Emma also expressed that students are laughed at during dodgeball and mentioned that she is frequently harassed:

It’s just when people throw the balls at you, it’s really hard because you get hit in the face and people laugh at you . . . It makes me mad and sad, because I always get yelled at by everybody and they laugh at me and I don’t like it. (bully-victim)

Multiple references were made to the laughter that erupted when students were hit, even when the targeted students exhibited embarrassment and pain.

In addition to laughter during dodgeball, Trey indicated that when students perform poorly during other class activities, it can incite laughter from others. For example, he described how a classmate took an errant shot during basketball: “Cause this one day that we’re playing this basketball game, he shot the ball too [high] way up so they [started] laughing at him—so he stupid now” (victim).

“Just Playing?”

While results suggested that bullies utilize various harassment tactics in physical education, some students reported that bullying is “just playing” around. Evidence indicated that some students perceived aggression as fun, either to excuse bullying behavior or cope with unwanted harassment. In contrast, some victims reported that they do not perceive that bullying is “just playing” and developed feelings of anger toward their perpetrators.

Fun and games? Some participants indicated that playful teasing can be misidentified as bullying. For instance, Alice suggested that she was wrongly chastised during an event in the locker room:

. . . this girl got mad at me because I was just playing with my friends and stuff, playing around with her. *Interviewer: How were you playing around?* We was like crackin’ jokes with each other and stuff, and this girl named Shana got mad at me and goes, ‘That’s not nice!’ and I was just playin’. (Alice, bully)

Roxie had a similar perception: “Cause at this school, like many people, they like tease each other but they just be playing—but sometimes, like at this school there’s really not no bullying” (bully).

Ben discussed his perceptions of “playing around,” and offered additional insight from the perspective of a bully-victim:

I mean, just sometimes kids, I mean I mess around. I play around . . . you just gotta know when to stop and when you can play around . . . I mean, most of the time bullying is from playing around . . . I mean, some people do it just for the reaction, like I said, but some people do it because they think it’s funny, and some people do it because it’s happened to

them before so I mean, it's just kinda their way to get back at the world for what's happened.

Although Ben acknowledged that he sometimes participates in “playing around” activities, he also recognized that those behaviors will likely be perceived as bullying by some students, particularly the victims of bullying behaviors. Louis affirmed this notion when he stated:

And he'll make fun of people or me in the back. And then sometimes he'll be like, 'Oh, I was just kidding,' which is fine, but other times he doesn't . . . and, one of my friends actually, he came up and he was kinda mean to me and then he like pushed me against the lockers and started, like hitting me. And I kinda fought back on that. I shoved him against the lockers and then afterwards he said, 'Oh, it's so fun,' and he acted like it was a game . . . I didn't see that. (victim)

Beth shared Louis' perception that bullying is not fun, even when the instigator claims to be “just playing.” She discussed an event in which her friend was verbally harassed in the locker room. When asked how her friend handled the bullying episode, she said, “She acted like it was just fun and games” (victim).

Rising anger. A handful of participants classified as victims had reached a point where they retaliated against the abuse by bullying in return. Louis reported that prolonged victimization led him to retaliate against his eight year-old brother. He stated, “And he'll make fun of me. And, I got all this bottled up anger from all the school—the people here. So I just take it out on him, which is horrible” (victim). Kate, on the other hand, was unapologetic for her perspective. She said, “Or if they're like sayin' really mean stuff about me, that's when I'm gonna hit somebody. I'm just sayin'. I'm for real” (victim).

“Snitch”—the sixth grade Scarlet Letter

Despite developing anger and frustration among some participants, many do not report bullying events. The stigma of “snitching,” or reporting bullying to adults, was referenced 25 times during formal interviews. Participants indicated that amplified teasing and threats silence students about bullying in physical education. Participants also revealed that adults do not fully understand the consequences of snitching on bullies.

Paralyzed by fear. The majority of participants reported that disclosing a bullying episode has dire consequences. For example, when asked if anyone reports bullying to physical education teachers, Joey stated, “No . . . Cause they’re like scared they’re going to get made fun of . . . or just get made fun of and called a snitch” (bystander). Except for bullies, students along the continuum described intense intimidation tactics employed to keep harassment unreported:

Instead of fist fighting, they’ll yell at you and say cuss words at you and say they’re gonna kill you, and they’re gonna pick on you everyday for how many days until they get in trouble, because when you snitch on them they’ll be mad, and when they come back, they’re coming after the person that told . . . (Emma, bully-victim)

. . . they threaten people with like, ‘I’ll come to your house and hurt you, cut you, smack you, punch you, if you tell, or I’ll grab you, strangle you, tie a rope to your bike and put it around your neck and just drag you across the street’ . . . This one kid told me that they were going to burn my house down. (John, victim)

Beth reported that fear prevents her from disclosing bullying events to adults, including her parents. When asked how it makes her feel to discuss bullying with her mom, she said, “Sometimes kind of scared . . . Because even though it’s at home I feel like sometimes the girls could still find out about it” (victim).

Adults don't understand. Some participants perceived that adults do not understand the consequences of snitching. For instance, James discussed how anti-bullying advertising campaigns encourage victims to report bullying. He stated, “Yeah, on the TV that bully thing that they’re saying. They don’t know what it means that when you snitch it even gets worse” (bully).

Neil reported that he does not discuss bullying with his parents: “I really don’t tell my family members ‘cause I don’t want them to get mad and call the school . . . the kid would keep doing it . . . they might say they are gonna beat me up since I told on them” (bystander).

Teachers Don't Care

While some students perceived that adults do not understand peer harassment, even more indicated that their physical education teachers, specifically, do not care about bullying. For example, Alice stated that when incidents of peer harassment are reported to physical education teachers, they ignore it. She said, “Because it [bullying] always happens and really, when you tell the teachers they really don’t care—but they act like they do care, so that’s why it’s a problem” (bully).

Jenny affirmed this notion when she reported that she and her friends teased someone in the locker room. When asked how the supervising teacher responded, she said, “She really didn’t care” (bully-victim). Similarly, when asked how her physical education teacher responded to bullying in class, Kate offered, “He doesn’t really say nothing . . . He just pays attention to the dodgeball game . . . ” (victim). Joey echoed:

Most of the time he just leaves it alone. And he just says, ‘ . . . they can solve it themselves.’ *Interviewer: You’ve heard him say that before?* No, but that’s what it looks like. (bystander)

“It’s just physical.” While some perceived that physical education teachers do not care about bullying, others indicated that bullying is addressed only when events are physical. For instance, John stated, “They started calling me gay and stuff and the teacher was like, ‘Quiet down everybody, quiet down’” (victim). John later described a bullying event in which he physically retaliated against his perpetrator: “. . . after the boy was on the floor bleeding they say like, ‘Oh, look at that kid—oh, let’s go over there and get him.’” Louis agreed by stating, “Yeah, most of the words get ignored. It’s just physical, or unless the words get out of control, like ‘Oh, I’ll beat you up.’ Like some people I know as friends will start crying from that . . .” (victim).

Rules are meaningless. In addition to perceiving a low level of concern for bullying from physical education teachers, students also reported that class rules regarding interpersonal relations are meaningless. When asked what class rules exist that encourage students to be kind to each other, responses were varied. Some indicated there are no such rules, while others provided a range of answers such as keep your hands to yourself, be supportive, work together, and do not fight.

The majority also indicated that rules are generally ignored in physical education. For example, Roxie said, “It [rules] don’t [work] ‘cause people still be putting their hands on each other in either the locker room or outside the locker room” (bully). Thomas offered, “I don’t think they work because people, they don’t really care” (bully). Jenny added, “Because they [students] don’t really pay attention to what the rules are” (bully-victim). Sam indicated that rules are meaningless because students do not fear punishment from teachers or administrators. He stated, “They don’t care if they get suspended or not . . . They just don’t” (bystander).

Treat Others How You Want To Be Treated, Until...

When participants were asked to describe parental advice pertaining to interpersonal relationships, the majority reported that their parents emphasize kindness toward classmates, with one-third referencing the adage, “Treat others how you want to be treated.” Some students, however, believed that their parents would encourage them to fight back, regardless of whether they were characterized as a bully or a victim. For instance, when asked how her parents would respond if she were bullied in physical education, Alice, a bully, said, “I should of got back up and hit them, that’s what they would’ve said. If somebody hit you, you got a right to hit them back.” Although Kate was characterized as a victim, she believed her mother would tell her say, “You better beat them down.”

Students were also asked to describe how their parents would react if they bullied another student during physical education. Although the majority reported that their parents would respond by removing social privileges or tangible items like a computer or television, some perceived that parents would utilize physical punishment. Val stated, “My mom would probably come up here and whoop me” (bully-victim). Alice offered, “I’d get a whoopin’ when I get home” (bully). Kate said, “Well, she would probably beat me because she doesn’t like me getting into trouble . . .” (victim). Louis echoed, “Belt or something like that. Spoon, whatever . . .” (victim).

The Peer Dynamic

The results were mixed with regard to how different students perceived peer support in relation to bullying. Bullies, for example, stated that they receive support from their peers for their bullying behaviors. Others, however, reported that friendship can offer protection against bullying. Some also indicated that regardless of friendship status, they avoid involvement in bullying episodes.

“Fight, fight, fight!” Bullies hypothesized that their classmates would come to their defense if they were bullied in physical education. For instance, Sasha said, “They would help me up and get mad at the other one, the one that did it.” Alice stated, “They’d be like, ‘Don’t touch my friend! Don’t touch my friend!’”

In contrast, some victims, bully-victims and bystanders perceived that if they were bullied, their peers would laugh or encourage a physical altercation. For example, Louis stated, “They’d probably see it and either they would laugh—I think they would laugh at the kid that got knocked down or they would gather around like, ‘Fight, fight, fight, fight!’ (victim). Fi added, “They’d say, ‘Dang, she knocked you out, ain’t you gonna do something about it?’” (bystander). Sam affirmed, “They’d be yelling, ‘Fight, fight, fight!’” (bystander). Bullies supported this notion by indicating that if they physically attacked someone in physical education, their classmates would laugh at the victim or “get all hyped up” (Roxie, bully).

Friends—a protective force. Participants were also asked to discuss prior bullying events and the type of perceived support they would receive from friends. Some participants reported that friendship entails confronting bullies and offering protection to friends against unwanted attacks. For instance, James stated:

I’m known—I used to be the one to handle all my friends’ problems. They be like, ‘Tell this kid to stop messing with me’ and I’d step in and if they push me, I’d push them back and we’d get in a big fight . . . (bully)

Others indicated that they protected their friends in the locker room:

He was picking on my friend . . . I was like, ‘Stop this man, you got to stop this’, and they were all calling him gay again. [I said] ‘Boy if you say gay one more time’, and he said gay one more time, and I ran up to him and I hit him in the face. (John, victim)

They made fun of my friend because her shoes were like a year ago. They say, ‘Your shoes are so late’ and stuff. I was like, ‘You had them shoes last year, so it’s not late!’

(Kate, victim)

Joey described how his friends covertly handle bullying events:

They said like, ‘Just don’t hit them back’—if somebody hits you, just drop a note by their desk and don’t put your name on it. Just drop it by their desk and they get it and then they beat up the person (for you). (bystander)

“Not my business.” Although some students emphasized the protective nature of friendship, many reported that they do not defend their friends. For example, Ben stated, “I try to stay out of it. I mean, if I see it, I want to do something, but put myself in someone else’s business is kinda awkward for me” (bully-victim). Emma affirmed the perception:

When my friends get hurt and (the bullies are) bigger than me, I just have to walk away.

But if I look and see my friend calling my name I say, ‘Uh-uh, I’m not getting in this.’

Because I don’t like getting into stuff that’s not my business. (bully-victim)

Beth admitted that she did not defend her friend who was being bullied in the locker room: “I didn’t want to do anything—I didn’t want to get involved” (victim). Neil explained that some students avoid protecting their friends because of fear: “They [students] just don’t want to get involved . . . ‘Cause they don’t want to get bullied, too” (bystander).

Physical Education Bullying Zones

Toward the end of the formal interview, students were shown a map of physical education spaces that included the gymnasium, locker rooms, fitness room, hallways, and the outdoor area. They were asked to use a marker to indicate the most active bullying zones for

physical education. Participants across the bullying continuum labeled the gymnasium, locker rooms, and outdoor area as spaces where most bullying occurs.

Locker rooms—places for anxiety and fear. Although the gymnasium and outdoor area were labeled as high frequency bullying zones in physical education, locker rooms appeared to generate the most instances of bullying. John (victim) indicated that “some people go hide in corners” to avoid being victimized in the locker room. Angie reported that some females intimidate others based on where they want to sit on locker room benches: “Some girls yell at me just ‘cause I’m sitting in a specific spot they want to sit in . . . So that I don’t get beat up or nothing I just get up and I don’t sit there” (victim). Some even described the anxiety they feel prior to entering the locker room:

I’m probably getting scared . . . I get a little nervous because I might get yelled at or pushed or hit [in the locker room], and I don’t like that, so sometimes I calm myself down and it works . . . I say to myself, ‘It’s alright, you’re not gonna get bullied, just be calm, be yourself, and don’t listen to anything they say—just walk away or tell the teachers.’ (Emma, bully-victim)

Well, I hope . . . like there’s these two kids that sit and I’m in between them [on the benches], so I’m like, ‘Ohhh, I hope they’re not there . . . Cause they’re always saying bad stuff and I don’t like being there then. (Louis, victim)

One of the reasons that bullying may occur more frequently in the locker room than in other settings is that students perceive teachers are seldom present to witness bullying events. For example, when asked how his teacher handled a bullying episode, Louis said, “Well, he didn’t see it. It was all between those green lockers . . . I think he was in his office” (victim). Neil affirmed, “Then nothing really happened, especially—the gym teacher wasn’t in the locker

room at the time” (bystander). Joey added, “Yeah, so like if people are picking on him behind the lockers, he [the teacher] won’t see anything” (bystander).

Curricular Activities that Ignite Bullying

Participants described those curricular activities that they perceive generate the most peer harassment. The two activities that were most closely connected to descriptions of bullying were dodgeball and the mile run, both of which have been discussed in the literature as activities where children can be teased because low skill performance is more obvious to others.

Dodgeball Friday. Every Friday, sixth grade students participate in a variation of elimination dodgeball. Although participants indicated an overall enjoyment of the game, some suggested that the negativity created while playing this activity travels to other classes that meet after physical education class ends.

Well, a lot of times it’s really fun, but then people say the other team cheated or the teachers cheated . . . then they go to their other classes and get really mad and they get office referrals . . . A lot of times they bring stuff that happens in a different class to the next class . . . My band teacher, which has half the gym [class], he doesn’t write a lot of referrals—he basically just sits there and talks to them until they calm down. (Amanda, bystander)

During observations of dodgeball, students were observed yelling, crying, laughing at others who were hit in the face, and even suggesting specific students to be targeted. For example, one student told others to hit Trey even though they were playing on the same team. Louis described students’ tendency to target specific others:

Well, sometimes in dodgeball, they’ll be like sitting on the bleachers and they’ll be talking about people and then they’ll tell like the other person to target that person. Go

for that person . . . And they will throw the ball as hard as they can at that person.

(victim)

The dreaded mile run. Evidence suggested that the mile run, scheduled for most Thursday afternoons, was overwhelmingly disliked by most and was often described as an activity that led to peer harassment. Emma stated, “They’ll . . . start pulling your hair and start punching you” (bully-victim). Mary felt similarly, “When we was running the mile . . . sometimes people be falling and sometimes people be pushing—be pushing somebody down . . . or bump somebody” (bystander).

Participants also reported that they dread the mile run because if they do not finish within a specified time, they may have to run again during another class period. Some indicated that this policy is particularly difficult for overweight students who are verbally taunted when they fail to run within the mandated timeframe. Jenny stated, “If we [are] out and running a mile they [other students] say, ‘You ain’t gonna finish it on time’” (bully-victim). Neil added, “Like some of them laugh at them [overweight students] because in the mile, nobody really ever makes it. These kids don’t ever make it” (bystander).

Bullying Impacts Participation and Attitude

Before students knew that the specific purpose of this investigation pertained to bullying, they were asked to report what they typically think about before physical education class begins. While bullies revealed that they wonder about impending class activities and whether or not they brought their physical education attire, others indicated that they worry about being victimized. For instance, Fi said, “That somebody gonna try to be pickin’ on you . . . ” (bystander). Beth stated, “Try to stay away from the girls that are mean to me” (victim). John added, “Like, why do people always talk mean stuff to people?” (victim). Angie reported, “That I hope today’s

going to be a lot better than the last day . . . Like, cause I hope that some days—I hope that no one will make fun of me and some days I just hope that I’ll have fun” (victim).

When asked to discuss the magnitude of peer harassment, 62.5% of participants reported that bullying is a prevalent phenomenon in physical education. The majority also reported that bullying in physical education impacts students’ desire to participate. For instance, Val stated that when students are laughed at for their appearance, “They just sit out and they’re just quiet” (bully-victim). Beth added, “Yeah, because some kids I think really do feel different after being bullied and they don’t want to participate . . . ” (victim). Jenny revealed that when students are bullied, “ . . . they don’t want to be in PE no more” (bully-victim).

Part II: Physical Education Teachers

Four physical education teachers, Mr. Valley, Mrs. Morris, Mrs. Westcott, and Mrs. Tillman, were formally interviewed on two occasions for approximately 30-50 minutes. Below are the seven themes and 17 subthemes that emerged from interview transcriptions and direct observations. Quotes are identified by the pseudonym of the participant.

Verbal Bullying

Participants utilized similar, but not identical, language to describe bullying behaviors of students. Although they did not report unanimous perceptions of what behaviors constitute bullying, they overwhelmingly expressed that verbal harassment is the most prevalent bullying tactic employed by students. When participants were asked to describe bullying behaviors, their responses were varied. For example, Mrs. Tillman explained, “I would say picking on other students, name-calling, making another student feel inferior in some way.” Mr. Valley described bullying as “nothing physical . . . just verbal abuse.” Mrs. Morris, however, described bullying as “using either words or, you know, physical actions, physical threats to make a student feel

unsafe or like they are scared to show up for a class, or just be themselves, or to take part in activities.” Finally, Mrs. Westcott explained that bullying also includes covert behaviors:

Name-calling, intimidating acts . . . it can be a push in line when we line up at the door to go out into the gym or back in. It can be during the game . . . the game might not be physical or [have] contact at all, but just a little bit of contact to let them know that if I want to push you, I’ll push you.

Participants unanimously indicated that verbal bullying is the primary method bullies utilize when harassing others. Physical education teachers made twenty references to verbal bullying, indicating that it refers to name-calling, threats, and taunting. For instance, Mrs. Morris stated: “What I see and hear in my sixth grade classes is pretty much more verbal—I haven’t had any instances this year that have been actual, real, you know, threatening things . . .”

Mr. Valley added:

Just saying derogatory things about them or making verbal threats. You know, I really don’t think they ever intend on carrying through on the threats, but just the fact they are making threats. “I’ll see you after school” or physical threats.

Mr. Valley ascribed minimal power to verbal bullying, even though he later reported that seemingly innocuous episodes of harassment sometimes lead to prolonged victimization for students:

That [verbal taunting] just goes from PE class to the next class to lunch—it just goes through the whole day and then it just spreads around the school . . . But I tell you, when that bell rings and they are going down the hall to the next class, that’s what they are talking about.

Mrs. Westcott indicated that verbal bullying is a serious form of harassment that sometimes triggers physical events:

This is sixth hour PE, so seventh hour when they go to class, now they get into a fist fight. I could have stopped it in the gym. I could have said, “Ok, we’re having an issue, she said this or you said that, or this has been going on for a couple months.” We could have [gone] to the office and dealt with it, but I didn’t—I said, “Break it up,” we left, the other kids kept antagonizing the other girl to do something.

Barriers to Bullying Detection

Participants perceive that bullying is an elusive phenomenon that is sometimes difficult to detect. Participants also reported that class size, noise levels, and locker room conditions all negatively impact bullying detection in physical education.

Bullying is like an iceberg. Physical education teachers indicated that covert forms of peer harassment are difficult to identify. For example, Mr. Valley emphasized that bullying is

kind of like an iceberg—you know, you can see a lot of it, but there’s a lot that you can’t see as well . . . parents have called and said [their children] don’t want to come to school because they’re being . . . bullied in PE class . . . I just don’t see it . . . So then you’ve got some kids that are probably going to be pretty good criminals when they get older because they are very good at what they do.

Mrs. Morris affirmed the notion that it is challenging for physical educators to witness subtle bullying events. She stated, “Unless they’re like brawling into a fight, there’s a lot of things I don’t see unless it really, really escalates.” Mrs. Morris’ statement confirms

students' perception that physical attacks, which are typically overt acts of peer harassment, are often the only bullying episodes addressed by physical educators.

Class conditions. The teacher participants unanimously identified class conditions as the primary barriers that prevented them from maintaining a safe environment for students. For instance, Mr. Valley indicated that class size impacts bullying detection: "The bigger the PE class, the more problems we have. Like that last one, sixth hour, we have over 100 kids in that class. And that just translates into problems . . ." Large class sizes and noise levels were also documented in field notes, with multiple references made to the "deafening noise" in the gymnasium.

Others discussed how class sizes affect the monitoring of bullying in locker rooms. During both formal interviews, Mrs. Tillman described how large class sizes and noise act as natural barriers to bullying detection: "With bigger classes, you don't hear anything but a massive amount of noise in here." Mrs. Westcott affirmed this notion by stating, "With our numbers, our numbers are huge. Our girls in the locker room, you can barely hear yourself think . . . so many girls, so many girls, such a small confined area." Mrs. Morris emphasized: "It's so loud in there . . . everything echoes off the walls and you can't hear every single thing."

The structure of the locker room was also identified as a factor influencing bullying detection in physical education. As described earlier in the chapter, the boys' and girls' locker rooms each have narrow rows with small lockers, a common area in the middle with three benches, and unused shower and storage spaces that act as nooks where some students change clothes. Mrs. Westcott reported that some females block the nooks, disallowing students from entering. She indicated that these intimidating acts can go undetected if

teachers are not properly supervising the area: “You’ve got to watch it like a hawk because it can just be little things that just intimidated a kid to want to be sick, to not want to get dressed for PE.”

Mrs. Tillman perceived that a general lack of space in the locker room leads to contentious issues among students:

You saw sixth hour—it’s really crowded in here [locker room], so trying to get into those small spaces and get to your locker . . . I mean, I’ll have girls that will bring things to my attention every now and then about somebody bothering them. “Can I move out of my row because this person is being mean to me? I don’t want to be in here.”

Mrs. Tillman also reported that the shower nooks are difficult to monitor: “Having those back shower areas like that—there’s a lot of visual back there that you can’t see around unless you’re standing right there.” Although Mr. Valley affirmed the notion that locker room design leaves “places where they [students] can be out of sight,” he later indicated that they “really don’t have any problems in the locker room.” Contrary to student participants who identified locker rooms as primary spaces for bullying in physical education, Mr. Valley reported that with the exception of “horseplay,” bullying is a rare phenomenon in the locker room.

No Battle Plan

Physical education teachers expressed a desire to combat bullying, yet their understanding of school initiatives pertaining to bullying and their collective approach to establishing class rules and handling peer harassment lacked alignment and consistency.

Out of the loop. When asked what school programs exist that deter students from bullying, teacher responses varied. For example, Mrs. Morris did not specify a school program, but indicated “that there’s pretty much a zero tolerance policy on bullying here.” Mrs. Tillman added, “I’m not sure . . . I think that our principal has done several assemblies with the different grade levels to talk about that [bullying].” Interestingly, although EMS is participating in the *Second Step Program*, a multi-year bullying prevention program, Mrs. Westcott was the only physical educator to indirectly discuss it: “I’m unaware of any—except the program . . . with our school’s sixth grade and I’m kind of out of the loop with that.” Finally, Mr. Valley reported that EMS utilizes a policy behavior incentive system “where the students are rewarded for good behavior.” He noted that he uses the program by rewarding physical education students with dodgeball participation, an activity that triggered bullying for some students on a weekly basis.

Abstract policies. Although teachers co-teach sixth grade physical education classes, they were unable to provide a unanimous list of class policies pertaining to student behavior. For example, Mrs. Tillman and Mrs. Morris discussed general rules about sportsmanship and teamwork. Mrs. Morris later emphasized that their rules are “a little abstract.” Mr. Valley and Mrs. Westcott, however, indicated that the class policy is, “Be respectful,” although Mrs. Westcott also suggested that physical education rules “should be a little bit more exact.”

Lack of strategies to stop bullying. In addition to an absence of clear rules governing student interactions, teachers also lacked consistency and knowledge when reporting strategies for addressing bullying. Mr. Valley expressed that he handles bullying on a “case-by-case basis.” He indicated that the threat of removing participation privileges

is an effective strategy to hinder bullying. Mrs. Tillman, however, explained that she attempts to diffuse peer harassment by making “light of” bullying situations. She also acknowledged that the manner in which she handles bullying might be due to her lack of personal experience with being a bullying victim:

Just encouraging positive words . . . because I don’t think I was every really bullied really badly, I think sometimes it’s harder then to put yourself in place of a student that . . . is bullied on a daily basis . . . it’s easy to just quickly dismiss that [bullying] and say, “Oh, just let it go. Let it go in one ear and out the other. Try to deal with that.””

Mrs. Morris reported that she handled bullying episodes with words rather than disciplinary action. She indicated that when a student harasses someone, she typically addresses such events by trying to elicit feelings of empathy from the bully:

I sit them out and talk with them right away and try to talk a little bit of sense into them—just help them to realize that it’s not fair to make a kid feel that way . . . they’re usually pretty honest when you ask them simple questions like, “Would you enjoy that if that was what you had to deal with every day?”

Mrs. Morris later expressed that conversations with bullying perpetrators only had temporary impact on their behavior, sometimes curbing the harassment for only one class period.

“Bad cop.” Mrs. Westcott explained that handling peer harassment by attempting to “relate to” students is an ineffective strategy for combating bullying:

I’m definitely “bad cop.” Mrs. Tillman and Mrs. Morris are so nice that they are almost too nice . . . they are more diplomatic and they will talk about a situation like,

“Well, why were you laughing?” I’m more like, “I know what you were doing so don’t try to play me.”

While Mrs. Westcott reported that she directly confronts bullies, she admitted to verbally reprimanding them in a public manner. Her verbally aggressive strategy for curbing peer harassment may encourage students to handle bullying in inappropriate ways. For instance, she stated:

He called her fat and I said, “Well, you’re ugly. How’s that” [He said,] “You’re a teacher, you shouldn’t say that.” I said, “You’re absolutely right, that’s really disrespectful isn’t it? But you calling her fat wasn’t disrespectful at all was it? I’m sure she feels really good about that. She’s going to go to lunch next hour and she’s going to feel just fine eating lunch. Her stomach’s not going to be in knots, she’s not going to feel bad about herself, or question now every time she puts clothes on” . . . it’s a teachable moment and I bring everybody in on it.

Bullies in Physical Education

Teachers identified groups of females, or “girl packs,” as the primary instigators of bullying in physical education. They also indicated that males do not bully as often as females. Finally, evidence indicated that bullies are athletically superior to those students whom they target.

Bullying in girl packs. Physical education teachers indicated that females bully in “girl packs,” a notion supported by student participants. Mrs. Westcott explained that bullying instigated by female packs is at a “crisis level”:

You don’t see one, you see a pack— God, they remind me of coyotes . . . Maybe someone bumped into someone in the hallway . . . and then they’ll take it in the

locker [room] . . . That girl that it happened to, the pack loves it. It's like the smell of blood and here they come.

Mr. Valley affirmed the perception that females bully in packs:

I usually see it in groups more than anything . . . If one person gets in a confrontation with somebody else, then this whole group . . . will come up to her, and on the other side [victim] you won't get a whole group of the friends to come over . . . The biggest thing I really see are the girls attacking, you know, a pack of girls attacking one kid . . .

Boys will be boys. While teachers overwhelmingly identified females as the primary perpetrators of bullying in physical education, results indicated they perceived that males are typically not bullies, but “rowdy,” “action-oriented,” and “competitive” students. Mr. Valley said, “Usually [with] the boys I don't see it as bullying . . . it's just they both kind of get up on each other and you just stop it right there and it's ok.” Mrs. Westcott affirmed the notion that boys do not bully often, stating:

I have to tell you, I just think that I have a good group of boys. Now I have two boys in my class that are incredible athletes, they love PE, love it, love it, love it. The only thing I see there, which I guess it's kind of bullying, but it's more like anger management.

Mrs. Westcott and Mr. Valley dismissed the verbally and physically aggressive actions of males, alluding to a “boys will be boys” mentality. While teachers perceived that boys do not bully others frequently during physical education, male victims who participated in this investigation reported differently. Numerous references were made to male bullying on multiple levels and in various locations associated with physical education.

Although Mrs. Westcott was clear during the first formal interview that males did not bully as frequently as females, she offered a different perspective during the second formal interview: “And I think that since you’ve been here, I’m more aware of it now and I see so much more. Even though it’s—remember when I always talked about the girls? I’m seeing the boys . . . ”

Bullies are athletically superior. Participants unanimously reported that students who bully in physical education are athletically superior to those whom they harass. When asked what type of student typically bullies during physical education, Mrs. Tillman said, “Usually my more physically active students, I would say, would do more bullying toward students that aren’t physically active.” Mr. Valley indicated a similar perception, stating, “The boys [bullies] participate very well, very well. Usually the boys [bullies] are...definitely the more skilled athletes out there...your better athletes make fun of them [victims].” Mrs. Morris concurred, adding, “I’ve noticed the girls [bullies] . . . sometimes they want to be on a certain team because they think they’re going to be a little bit better. ‘She can’t play as well.’ ” Mrs. Morris further stated that while females do bully others based on athletic ability, it is more typical for males to bully others for level and quality of participation during physical education.

Although teachers affirmed the notion that female bullies are athletically dominant to those whom they bully, they infrequently participate in class activities. Mrs. Westcott stated, “You know what the funny thing is? I think the bullies, my girl bullies, have a lot of athletic ability. Do they use it? No. Because they are too busy running their mouth and stirring it up.” Mr. Valley concurred with the idea that female bullies rarely participate. He stated, “A lot of times with the girls [bullies], it’s the ones that lack the participation . . . ”

Victims in Physical Education

Physical education teachers reported that perceived weakness is the primary reason students are bullied in physical education. Teachers also indicated that victims desire to remain invisible in physical education.

Weakness. Teachers made thirteen comments pertaining to weakness as a victim characteristic. Although student participants perceived that victims are targeted mostly for appearance, they also confirmed that some are bullied based on perceived weakness. Mrs. Morris described a student who was specifically targeted during dodgeball and suggested his victimization was due to his lack of strength: “He’s not an athletic kid . . . kind of a little bit wimpy looking, you know, just that kind of stereotypical type of a—might be perceived as being just the kid who’s not going to be able to defend himself.”

Mr. Valley expressed that bullies specifically seek out those who are weaker and cannot fight back:

The ones that get picked on are 90% the ones that are obviously much more timid, less likely to confront the bullier, much . . . less likely to report any type of bullying going on. So, you know, the bullies really pick out the victims, the ones they think they can get to the easiest . . . It’s almost certainly the more emotional students who are just going to stay in their shell and not report anything or fight back.

Victims wish they could disappear. Participants reported that victims wish to remain invisible during physical education. When asked to what extent victims participate in class activities, Mrs. Westcott stated:

I can tell you when the victim's a victim—when the victim's going through some of this or you can tell it's an uncomfortable day. . . . They wish they could—they could disappear. And it's awful.

Mrs. Tillman added:

You'll see them [bullies] say stuff to them and then I'll see that student look kind of—retract. They are not going to try harder because someone has said that to them. They'll just say, "Forget it. I don't care, I don't like PE anyway." And then I get frustrated with students like that because I don't want students to feel that way about being physically active. I think that then creates an atmosphere of, "I don't like PE."

Results suggested that victims are sometimes successful at remaining invisible during physical education. For instance, Mr. Valley emphasized that victims are the "students that you don't really notice . . . They don't excel and at times there are ones that don't participate much, but other times they are the ones that just basically do what they need to get by."

Who to Blame?

Both formal interviews with physical education teachers revealed that they perceived various factors are to blame for the bullying phenomenon in their classes. Specifically, participating teachers blamed parents, the nature of physical education, the snitching stigma, and bystanders as reasons bullying occurs in physical education.

Parents. All four physical educators referenced the home lives and lower socioeconomic status of students when discussing the bullying phenomenon. Mr. Valley indicated that students directly and indirectly learn to be aggressive at home:

It's something that they can learn at home from their parents . . . we've got 86% on free or reduced lunch . . . very little parental involvement. A lot of the kids are from

single families with no father figure, so a lot of them are on their own to an extent . . .

So maybe some of that [bullying] is through intimidation or always putting up a front of being an intimidator.

Mrs. Westcott shared Mr. Valley's contention that some students are learning aggression and intimidation due to a lack of appropriate parental supervision at home. She also emphasized that although students are executing bullying behaviors at school, they would not label themselves as bullies:

I think when you have such a low socioeconomic class as we do—I think that sometimes they feel empowered. I don't know if they see themselves as a bully—I don't know that they would ever classify themselves as a bully. I think they would say, "I'm strong, I stand up for myself, I don't take any crap."

Mrs. Tillman perceived that black female students verbally harass others more frequently than white females because they are encouraged by parents to "speak out, say what you think, if that bothers you, just say it."

While Mr. Valley, Mrs. Westcott, and Mrs. Tillman focused on parental influence on bullying behavior, Mrs. Morris provided insight into why she perceives some victims are allowed by parents to avoid participation in physical education. She stated that some students provide parental notes excusing them from class. When Mrs. Morris contacts parents, some have indicated that their children do not enjoy physical education because they are being bullied. Mrs. Morris contends that if the parent was bullied as a child, he or she is more likely to sympathize with the student and enable him or her to avoid class participation:

Maybe that parent was also bullied as a kid, so they just, so they kind of don't care—especially here where their grade doesn't necessarily count toward their GPA . . . I

had a parent who said, “I hated PE, I was bullied and I hated dressing.” How do you encourage your child, tell them that PE is something that they just have to treat as really important when they had a really bad experience with it as well? I think that’s tough.

The nature of physical education. Teachers also reported that the public nature of physical education generates bullying. When asked to what extent she perceived that bullying is a problem in sixth grade physical education, Mrs. Morris stated:

It’s definitely there within PE because it goes hand in hand with kids already feeling hesitant about playing games . . . it’s even just the idea of possibly being bullied, it doesn’t even have to be that they’re actually getting made fun of—“What if I do this and I step out and I fail? What are my peers going to think?”

Mrs. Morris also emphasized that the public nature of activities is especially difficult for her overweight students, whom she perceives are particularly vulnerable to bullying within physical education:

They usually feel a little more scrutinized with everything that they do because of how it looks, you know, if they’re running or if they’re jumping . . . they feel a little bit uncomfortable and like, “How does this look to other people when I move this way?”

Mrs. Tillman also reported that the public nature of physical education impacts some students’ desire to participate for fear of being victimized:

“I don’t want to feel embarrassed because I can’t throw a ball, or I can’t run because I’m heavy, or someone’s going to make fun of me because I can’t throw a dodgeball

as hard as the other boys in the class, or I can't aim well—I can't hit anybody and someone's gonna make fun of me for that.”

Snitching stigma. Although student participants perceived that adults do not understand the magnitude of reporting bullying events, physical education teachers indicated that they are aware of the snitching stigma. They also revealed that students' fear of snitching is another reason why bullying persists in their classes. For instance, Mrs. Morris said, “It's hard to even get the kid who's being bullied to even admit that it's going on because they are even more fearful . . . ” Mr. Valley added, “The kids don't report it [bullying] . . . And then there's kids that will stay home from school—they're too scared to say something about it.”

Mrs. Westcott emphasized that the snitching stigma impedes her ability to effectively deter bullying in physical education:

This little girl that's being bullied doesn't want to say anything, so when this stuff happens she ignores it, turns the other way . . . And it just keeps going on and on in a vicious cycle . . . [I told] another girl in class, “You need to let me know—it's not narking, it's not snitching, this is for me to be able to do the job that I'm paid to do . . . my job is to make it safe and successful for you. Do you feel safe? Do you feel like this was a successful day for you in PE? I can't read minds. I can't fix what I don't know is a problem.”

Student bystanders. In addition to blaming bullying in physical education on various ecological factors associated with the home and school settings, teachers also expressed frustration with student bystanders, those who watch bullying episodes but do little to intervene. For example, Mrs. Westcott stated:

I think there's something about conflict—there's something about the drama that they feed off of . . . But yet that pack that had nothing to do with it was right there—you know, like throwing gasoline on the fire.

Mr. Valley indicated that when bullying episodes occur, friends of the perpetrator surround the events “to not only stand by her, but to egg it on.” He reported that bystanders “will get them [the bully] fired up,” a notion supported by student participants who discussed how their classmates encourage physical altercations by chanting, “Fight, fight, fight!”

Mrs. Morris described an event that occurred while students were sitting on the bleachers. A male sixth grader antagonized a female, who then started kicking the male. Mrs. Morris emphasized that the bystanders were visibly and audibly excited by the event and did nothing to dissuade the students from harming each other. She also indicated that due to such events, she tries to enlist the help of bystanders in diffusing bullying episodes:

Get a kid that's a tone-setter—somebody that would step in. I usually just take that kid aside and say, “You know, kids are going to follow what you do—they like you.” There's kids that have an innate ability to sway the way for kids and if you kind of get them on your side a little bit . . . They don't have to sound silly or anything like that, but just encouraging them to say, “You know, that's not cool.”

Teacher Choices

Based on field notes and transcriptions, evidence indicated that teacher choices pertaining to class management and curricular content could either facilitate or deter bullying in physical education.

Class management. The majority of observed instances of bullying appeared to be the result of poor class management. Once students walked into the gymnasium after

changing clothes, they waited an average of 11 minutes to participate in the lesson. Field notes revealed that students do bully more frequently while standing in lines, sitting in the bleachers, or leaning against the walls of the gymnasium. Mrs. Morris acknowledged that peer harassment sometimes stems from limited activity time: “I almost think sometimes when boys have more time on their hands, if they’re not engaged in it as much, it’s like they’re going to look around . . .”

When participating in softball in the grassy area outside the school, an average of 21 students were waiting in a single file line to bat. Despite having adequate space to accommodate multiple games, only one was organized. Poor management choices left students waiting in line and standing idly in the outfield. Multiple bullying episodes were observed, including instances of physical attacks, verbal taunts, and threats.

When students participated in activities in the gymnasium, teachers would typically direct approximately 18-20 students to sit in the bleachers or wait along the periphery. Students rotated out after a set amount of time or after a participating team “won” a game such as dodgeball. Mrs. Westcott acknowledged, “We have quite a bit of down time in the gym. You know, how like one class sits while the other class is participating?” Students were observed whispering, laughing, and physically attacking others while waiting to participate in class activities.

Teachers also utilized poor class management by enabling students to avoid participation during physical education. On average, 8-14 students, typically females, were observed leaning against the gymnasium walls in small groups rather than participating in activities. Field notes revealed that Mr. Valley pointed to a large group of females standing against the wall and informally stated, “See, that’s where something will start brewing.”

Although Mr. Valley recognized that the environment was ripe for bullying, he made no effort to proactively reduce the potential for bullying to emerge by altering the class structure.

Influence of curriculum on bullying. While prosocial behaviors such as cooperation and teamwork were observed during teambuilding, rollerskating, and badminton units, bullying and antisocial behaviors were heavily documented on “Dodgeball Fridays.” Although the literature overwhelmingly identifies dodgeball as a “Hall of Shame” activity (Williams, 1992; NASPE, 2006) that should not be included in a physical education curriculum, teachers facilitated dodgeball every week. Mrs. Westcott stated, “I love aggressive activity. We have an administrator that hates dodgeball, hates it, thinks it’s inhumane, it’s evil. I love it, I love it.” Mrs. Tillman also informally emphasized, “I love dodgeball.”

Evidence indicated that teachers are cognizant of the negative ramifications of playing dodgeball. For instance, Mrs. Morris stated, “We were playing dodgeball and he’s running around and he’s really going after this one kid . . . I could tell eventually he was just beaming them at him quickly and not really going for anybody else.” Although teachers acknowledged that bullying can emerge from dodgeball participation, they did not perceive that dodgeball is a poor curricular choice for physical education. For instance, Mr. Valley recognized the potential embarrassment that can emerge from playing dodgeball, but indirectly indicated that if a student is hit and subsequently taunted, it is most often due to his or her lack of participation: “One of them will just get drilled in the head [during dodgeball] because they are not participating . . . at least the kid doesn’t get hurt because we use those sponge balls, but still, it can be—it’s embarrassing to them.”

Mrs. Morris, the new addition to the EMS faculty, was the only teacher to express concern about including dodgeball in the curriculum:

When I started here, I was like, “Wow, they play dodgeball every Friday? Wow.”

. . . I do think that there’s some things that we could do better as far as maybe offering some different sorts of activities . . . kind of a fitness, nutrition, dance, yoga option . . . I tell some of these girls, “Get through middle school. I know it’s hard if you’re in sixth grade and you hate PE, but maybe you like dancing, you’re gonna get that as an option later on.”

Chapter Summary

To summarize, the results from this investigation indicate that students are bullied in physical education for perceived differences pertaining to appearance, weakness, ability, and behavior. Student participants also reported bullies employ verbal harassment, intimidation, physical attacks, and laughter when bullying others. Some perceived that harassment behaviors are “just playing” around and that those actions are often misidentified as bullying.

Student participants also revealed that they are afraid to report bullying due to the stigma associated with being perceived as a “snitch” and the possibility of intensified harassment. They reported that adults do not comprehend bullying and that physical education teachers, specifically, do not address most forms of peer harassment.

With regard to perceived support, students indicated that parents generally expect them to be kind to their classmates, but some also want them to retaliate if bullied in physical education. Bullies reported they have a strong peer support network with regard to harassment, indicating that their classmates would defend them if attacked in physical education. Others perceived that their classmates would laugh or encourage a fight. When discussing actual bullying events in

physical education, some reported that friendship involves defending friends from bullies, while others indicated that remaining neutral is the safest way to avoid being victimized.

Students overwhelmingly identified and described locker rooms as the physical education spaces in which the most bullying occurs. They also reported that dodgeball and the mile run, two recurring weekly activities, frequently generate bullying. Finally, participants indicated that bullying impacts students' attitude and desire to participate in physical education activities.

Although physical education teachers described bullying with different terms than students, they unanimously reported that students most frequently use verbal harassment when bullying. Teachers also expressed that covert forms of bullying are difficult to detect, especially given class sizes, noise levels, and the physical structure of locker rooms.

Evidence also indicated that physical educators lacked a cohesive plan to address bullying. Specifically, they lacked an aligned comprehension of school-level bullying initiatives, physical education class policies regarding interpersonal relations, and strategies to combat bullying in classes.

Similar to students, physical educators indicated that girl packs bully more often than boys. Physical educators perceived that boys' aggression pertained more to competitiveness and anger management than to bullying. Teachers also reported that bullies are athletically dominant to victims. Victims, on the other hand, were perceived to be "weaker" students who desired to be invisible during physical education classes.

Rather than taking ownership of bullying in physical education, teachers indicated that parents, the public nature of physical education, the snitching stigma that prevents students from informing teachers of bullying episodes, and the antagonistic role of student bystanders are to blame for peer harassment in their classes. Finally, the results suggest that class management

and curricular choices directly contributed to the emergence of bullying within physical education.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Scholars contend that the psychological ramifications for both bullies and victims cannot be ignored (Swearer et al., 2001; Slee, 1995; Duncan, 1999b; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 1999; Brunstein Klomek et al., 2007; O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001), making bullying prevention in schools a public health concern (Spriggs et al., 2007). The purpose of the present study was to discover the perceptions students and teachers have about bullying in physical education, and the perceptions students have about peer and adult support pertaining to bullying in physical education.

The Ecological Systems Theory (EST) that grounded this investigation can be conceptualized by placing the child in the center of four concentric circles that are used to delineate different levels of environmental influence (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). This chapter will describe the different levels of EST in relation to how they impacted the sixth grade physical education classes at Eastbourne Middle School (EMS). In addition, the chapter will address the results as they fit into an EST framework, the limitations and implications of the study, and recommendations for future research.

Macrosystem

According to EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979), students are impacted by a series of ecological factors that are depicted as circles. The outermost circle of EST is the macrosystem, which includes influential factors like national position statements, legislation, and the media. Several national efforts have been directed at curbing school bullying (Macklem, 2003). For example, the Centers for Disease Control published a compendium for scholars, bullying prevention specialists, and health educators who were interested in designing bullying prevention programs (Hamburger, Basile, & Vivolo, 2011). President Obama also allocated \$132 million to

combat bullying by instituting state and local grants under the “Successful, Safe, and Healthy Students” program. Senators from Pennsylvania and Illinois introduced anti-bullying legislation called the “Safe Schools Improvement Act,” which would require schools that receive federal funding to develop codes of conduct and bullying prevention programs (CNN, 2011). Finally, government officials, scholars, and educational practitioners gathered in Washington D.C. to discuss strategies to combat school bullying at the Federal Partners in Bullying Prevention Summit (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

In addition to national efforts, other high profile media campaigns have addressed school bullying. For instance, the “It Gets Better Project” continues to generate video messages from celebrities and others to advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adolescents who are coping with peer harassment (CNN, 2011). Extensive media coverage of this project has garnered national attention. After a 14 year-old fan of popular music icon Lady Gaga ended his life due to prolonged bullying, the musician met with legislators in Washington D.C. to discuss proactive solutions to end peer harassment (Hughes, 2011). She also announced the 2012 launch of the “Born This Way Foundation,” which will focus on anti-bullying initiatives.

Although a national awareness and policy efforts are expanding, researchers are still finding that bullying is continuing to grow as an epidemic (Macklem, 2003). During her “Free and Equal in Dignity and Rights” United Nations address, Hillary Clinton (2011, December 6) stated, “Progress comes from changes in laws . . . laws have a teaching effect.” Clinton’s statement suggests that sometimes legislation precedes substantive change.

Exosystem

Nested within the macrosystem is the exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979), which contains indirect influencers on students, such as district-level school policies that may be

derived as a result of state or federal legislation. For example, the U.S. Department of Education (2011) released a report titled “Analysis of State Bullying Laws and Policies” that synthesizes current bullying legislation within 46 states. The report indicated that from 1999 to 2010, more than 120 bills were enacted to address school bullying. One such bill prohibits all forms of bullying, harassment, and hazing within public schools. Another mandates that each school must develop and maintain a bullying policy that is updated every two years and filed with the State Board of Education (NASBE, 2011). As a result of this legislation, school districts are beginning to make policy changes.

Based on the most current school district policy manual examined for the current investigation, the EMS district is in compliance with state law. The policy outlines a comprehensive definition of bullying and provides numerous examples pertaining to physical and verbal harassment. The policy states, “Bullying, intimidation and harassment diminish a student’s ability to learn and a school’s ability to educate. Preventing students from engaging in these disruptive behaviors is an important district goal” (NASBE, 2011). The policy also directs schools to provide “periodic” bullying prevention training for all school staff and students. Recently, a newspaper article indicated that the school board governing EMS voted to implement a full-time police officer after reported increases in violence and bullying at EMS.

Mesosytem

The mesosystem refers to the interplay between two settings in which students are embedded, such as school and home (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). With regard to the school setting, EMS was located in a lower socioeconomic status neighborhood. Once parents and other visitors that represent the home setting check in with the main office upon entering the building, they may note a number of manufactured and student-drawn anti-bullying posters lining the

walls in the EMS corridors and gymnasium. Some student posters read, “Stop bullying and be a friend” and “Bullying is not cool!” Another contains a sketch of a girl saying, “You’re ugly!” to a girl with tears in her eyes. The posters were part of EMS’s involvement in the *Second Step Program*, a multi-year bullying prevention program supported by the principal and made explicit to parents through informational letters and informed consent documents.

Despite these efforts at the school level, the present study suggests that much less effort was expended by the physical education staff to interact with parents in relation to bullying prevention. Other than isolated contact with parents who called to complain about instances of peer harassment during physical education class, there appeared to be no collaboration between parents and teachers about how to foster a safe environment for students. Teachers suggested that many EMS parents show little interest in their children’s performance at school, which they contend contributes to increased aggressive and antisocial behaviors in their classes. This notion was supported by Ma (2002) who found that strong parental involvement in the sixth grade reduced instances of bullying.

When considering the ecological factors that might impact bullying in physical education, one must consider students’ perceptions of their parents. While student participants perceived that their parents generally want them to treat their peers with kindness, they also perceived that their parents want them to stand up for themselves if bullied, even if it leads to a physical altercation. As a result, many students received mixed information from their parents that may have been difficult for them to process. Additionally, student comments pertaining to parental use of physical punishment leads one to question what direct and indirect messages are conveyed about aggressive behavior, especially given that research has shown a connection between

parental violence and bullying behaviors (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000; Farrington, 1993).

Finally, participants suggested that many EMS students receive free or reduced lunch, a reality they connected to bullying perpetration. Research, however, indicates that the bullying phenomenon cuts across communities with varied levels of poverty (Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003; Macklem, 2003), indicating that regardless of teachers' perceptions, students are not bullying one another simply because they receive free or reduced lunch (Bosworth & Espelage, 1999).

Microsystem

The student resides in the innermost of the four concentric circles, the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). When students reported episodes of bullying in physical education, they were describing events that were occurring in the microsystem. Despite the prevalence of bullying in physical education and the policies that have been enacted at the other levels of the system to prevent its occurrence, students perceived that physical education teachers were indifferent to bullying. They reported that teachers do very little to intervene when bullying occurs, a finding supported by the extant literature pertaining to general school contexts (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Hazler, Hoover, & Oliver, 1993; Slee, 1994; Olweus, 1993b; Craig & Pepler, 1998). They also suggested that ignoring verbal bullying, addressing only physical acts of aggression, and failing to establish meaningful class rules guiding student behavior were evidence that teachers do not care about bullying.

Similar to Hazler, Miller, Carney, and Green (2001) who found that teachers do not perceive verbal bullying to be a serious form of harassment, some physical educators in this study dismissed verbal threats and taunts as harmless despite the large number of students who

reported that they or others were intimidated by taunts and other forms of verbal bullying. When ignored, bullying may be exacerbated (Craig & Pepler, 1997), and students may even begin to perceive that teachers condone bullying (Gropper & Froschl, 2000).

Students also reported that class rules related to personal interactions were rarely upheld and that physical education teachers do not adequately address bullying unless it becomes a physical event, a notion supported in another investigation examining general school context (Stephenson & Smith, 1989). If students, however, perceive that physical education teachers do not enforce class rules or care about forms of bullying other than physical attacks, there is little motivation for victims to report such events.

Students overwhelmingly indicated that there were negative ramifications for reporting bullying episodes to physical educators and other adults. Students, for example, did not report bullying because of perceived threat and the social stigma associated with being a “snitch.” This finding is supported by Smith et al. (2001) who discovered that students believed their social standing would be damaged if they reported bullying events. Student participants also perceived that adults do not comprehend snitching or its consequences. These findings suggest that more aggressive steps must be taken to create a worthwhile and safe avenue for victims to report bullying, particularly because it appears to reduce future victimization (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997).

Despite their own lack of involvement, physical educators blamed bystanders for escalating levels of peer harassment. They expressed that bystanders serve as the “gasoline on the fire,” encouraging various forms of bullying while standing on the periphery. Student participants confirmed that bystanders inflame bullying events but admitted that some do not assist victims for fear of being bullied themselves. Clearly, one mechanism for curbing

bullying is to encourage bystanders to play a more forceful role in discouraging classmates from bullying each other. The research, however, indicates that while bystanders may be equipped to diffuse bullying (Salmivalli 1999; Twemlow, Fonagy, & Sacco, 2004), it will require major intervention efforts and considerable education.

When exploring peer support pertaining to bullying, some student participants indicated that they were more comfortable pursuing a friend-initiated defense against bullies as opposed to discussing victimization with adults. While the majority of students perceived they could discuss bullying situations with friends, evidence suggested that tangible support mattered most. Advice such as “just ignore them” or “tell the teacher” did not carry the same impact as a friend who “had your back.” This notion is supported by Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro and Bukowski (1999) who found that friendship quality and level of protection mattered.

In relation to the environment where bullying occurs, contrary to Astor et al. (2004) who found that “undefined spaces” such as hallways are high frequency bullying zones, only a few students indicated that harassment occurred in the school corridors leading to physical education facilities. This was not surprising given the school-wide policy requiring students to walk in supervised, single file lines. Additionally, only a few students mentioned the fitness room as a location where peer harassment occurs.

When students were asked to identify the locations in which the most bullying occurs in physical education, the majority identified and described locker rooms. Morrow and Gill (2003) also discovered that students perceived locker rooms to be unsafe. Although physical education teachers in this study revealed that locker room conditions, such as overcrowding and noise levels, were barriers to addressing bullying, most did not perceive that peer harassment in those

spaces was a significant concern. Some student participants, however, described how locker rooms were places to avoid due to incessant verbal and physical bullying. While physical educators perceived that their locker room supervision strategies were sufficient, students did not report the same. Overall, locker rooms are vulnerable spaces in which adolescent students, who are often sensitive about their physical appearance, are asked to change clothes in front of their peers (Trout & Graber, 2009), sometimes outside of the full supervisory scope of teachers.

Physical education teachers reported that class size and noise levels prevented them from maintaining a safe educational environment. Although these are legitimate concerns, their class management techniques and curricular selections facilitated an environment ripe for bullying. Rink (2003) stated, “Most often you cannot see good management, but you will see the effects of poor management” (p. 171). When examining the physical education teachers’ class management protocols, Rink’s insight was supported. Observed instances of bullying occurred while students waited for attendance to be taken, while sitting in the bleachers or against the walls of the gymnasium, and while waiting in long lines. Although one teacher acknowledged that classes have “a lot of down time,” physical educators did not take ownership of the impact that management decisions had on the emergence of inappropriate student behavior. Unfortunately, their inability to minimize student wait-time or exhibit “with-it-ness” in order to promptly and appropriately respond to off-task or anti-social student behavior (Kounin, 1970) only provided further opportunity for bullying to emerge.

Physical educators’ poor class management strategies were compounded by controversial curricular selections. For example, dodgeball was included as part of the weekly curriculum despite the fact that scholars have labeled it as a pedagogically void physical education activity (Williams, 1992; NASPE, 2006). In the present investigation, there were instances when

dodgeball sparked bullying events such as intentionally targeting others who were perceived as weaker or unpopular. Another controversial curricular selection was the mile run, which was an overwhelmingly disliked activity that led to various forms of harassment for some students, especially those who could not run quickly. Despite the health benefits that running provides, physical education teachers must consider how their curricular choices impact students. If overweight and slower students are bullied while running, these negative psychological effects may overpower any positive physical effects that could otherwise be gained.

Physical education teachers expressed that regardless of gender, bullies were athletically superior to victims, a finding supported by existing research (Rodkin et al., 2000). Despite this, they reported that female bullies infrequently used their skills to participate in class activities. In contrast, aggressive males often participated vigorously in class activities and were described with words such as “competitive” and “rowdy.” This finding begs for further research that examines gender differences in relation to performance levels in physical education and physical activity settings.

The physical education teachers reported that “weak” students were targeted most frequently during class. This finding is not surprising in light of other studies that have highlighted that peer harassment seems to be incited by factors that range from appearance (Besag, 1989; Janssen, Craig, Boyce, & Pickett, 2004; Fox & Edmunds, 2000; Trout & Graber, 2009), to disability (Misha, 2003; Garrity & Barris, 1996) to behaviors deemed irritating (Oliver, Hoover, Hazler, 1994).

Finally, the results suggest that peer harassment impacts bullied students’ desire to participate and their attitude toward physical education. Some students reported that they feel anxious before and after class and teacher participants expressed that students who are frequently

harassed desire to remain invisible during physical education, a notion supported by prior research (Carlson, 1995; Portman, 1995; Trout & Graber, 2009).

Scholars have argued that an expert physical education teacher is a “virtuoso,” or someone who can effectively teach relevant subject matter *and* who is sensitive to the social and moral agenda of physical education (O’Sullivan & Doutis, 1994; Dodds, 1994). Yet, if a physical education teacher lacks expertise, he or she may be unaware of bullying or not know how to handle it appropriately. When exploring the ecology of physical education, it is important to understand that most students are required to change clothes, sweat, and physically interact with their peers; conceivably making physical education one of the most vulnerable contexts in which students are engaged throughout the school day. Therefore, it is imperative that they feel safe in the microsystem of physical education.

Limitations

The researcher recognizes that some students may have withheld their true perceptions of or roles related to bullying in physical education for fear of how they might be perceived. Scholars, however, contend that when interviews are conducted by individuals who are not associated with the school, students may feel more comfortable to discuss specific bullying issues that are not addressed in more quantitative assessments (Glover, Cough, Johnson, & Cartwright, 2000). Despite repeated assurances that their responses would be confidential, answering questions pertaining to student and teacher behavior may have been daunting for some sixth graders, especially given the “snitch” subculture in which they are enmeshed.

Additionally, although the locker rooms were labeled as high frequency bullying zones, the researcher was unable to observe student and teacher behaviors within those

spaces due to privacy concerns. Therefore, student and teacher reports were accepted as primary sources of data pertaining to locker room bullying.

Finally, participants indicated that students with disabilities are victims of bullying within physical education. An autistic student was identified by Mrs. Morris as a victim whom the researcher should interview. The interview lasted approximately three minutes before the student became highly agitated and was unable to express his perceptions pertaining to bullying. Recognizing his discomfort, the researcher terminated the interview. The researcher acknowledges that students with physical/cognitive impairments could have offered a unique perspective pertaining to bullying in physical education, however, the psychological comfort of this particular student became more important than uncovering his perceptions.

Implications for Physical Education Teachers

One myth associated with peer harassment is that teachers know how to handle bullying because it is their job (Sullivan, 2000). This myth is dangerous in that it presupposes that teachers intuitively understand how to combat peer harassment and do not require bullying prevention training or school-wide interventions. Although one meta-analysis reported that the majority of school bullying prevention programs have no meaningful impact on bullying behaviors (Merrell & Isava, 2008), another indicated that interventions that targeted parents, utilized multimedia educational materials, and developed teacher competence were successful at reducing peer harassment in schools (Farrington & Tfofi, 2009). Although interventions developed at the national, state, and local levels have addressed bullying, they have largely ignored the unique needs of the physical education setting.

One curricular option for physical educators is Hellison's (1985), "Teaching for Personal and Social Responsibility" model. This instructional model encourages physical educators to adopt a holistic approach in reaching adolescents due to the vastly different environments in which they live. Hellison (1985) contends that although physical education teachers cannot change the violence and poverty that many students experience, they can foster an environment that teaches students how to develop personal and social responsibility.

Recommendations for Future Research

Swearer and Doll (2001) have warned against bullying research becoming an educational fad. Despite their concern, more research pertaining to bullying in physical education must be undertaken. First, future research might focus on examining teacher educators and pre-service teachers' dispositions toward bullying, and the degree to which bullying prevention should be addressed in teacher education. Second investigators could examine physical education teachers' perceptions related to where they fell along the bullying spectrum as children and how their personal experiences influence how they react to bullying in their classes. Third, bullying research might address how gender differences, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, physical ability, and other factors impact bullying in physical education. Fourth, investigators could explore how school architecture and environmental factors affect bullying in physical education *and* physical activity settings like recess. Fifth, future investigations should more thoroughly examine how legislation and policy efforts at the levels of the macrosystem and exosystem funnel down to physical education. Finally, examining the effectiveness of different interventions in eliminating bullying in physical education environments is timely and warranted.

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Appendix A

Student Interview Guide

Interviewer: My name is Jamie and I am a student at the University of Illinois. Today I am here to talk about your experiences in physical education class. Is it ok if I audiotape our interview? It will help just in case I don't remember everything you say. Your answers will be kept confidential, meaning I won't tell your teachers, classmates or parents what you say. It will stay between us. During the interview, if there is a question you don't want to answer because it makes you feel uncomfortable, you don't have to. Also, if there's a question you don't understand, let me know and I'll try to explain it better. Ready to get started?

Icebreaker

1) Are you allowed to watch TV? If so, what are a few of your favorite TV shows? (Possible probe: Why do you like them?) If not, what do you like to do in your free time?

Physical Education

2) Tell me about "Dodgeball Fridays." How do you feel about dodgeball? What type of students in your class like the game? What type of students in your class do not like the game? Explain.

3) What thoughts typically run through your mind when you are getting ready to go to PE class? What are you typically thinking in the locker room right before class starts?

4) Explain why you are either comfortable or uncomfortable participating during PE class. Who, if anyone, encourages you to participate during PE class?

5) What type of students are teased or harassed the most during PE? Why do you think students are mean to them? Do you ever feel like someone deserves to be picked on because of the way they are acting in class? Explain.

6) Describe a time, if this has happened, when someone was mean to you during PE (pushing, name-calling, making you feel like you weren't welcome in a group). Describe a time, if this has happened, when you or your friends were mean to someone during PE. Potential probes: (Where did it happen? How often does that happen?)

7) Describe a time, if this has happened, when someone was mean to you or someone else in the locker room. Did someone tell the teacher? What did he/she do? Describe a time, if this has happened, when you or your friends were mean to someone in the locker room.

PE Teachers/Class Policies

8) What, if any, class rules are in place that encourage students to be kind to each other? Explain why you feel the rules either work or do not work.

9) What does your PE teacher do when students are mean to each other in class? If someone is mean to you or someone else during class, explain why you are either comfortable or uncomfortable telling your PE teacher. Locker room?

10) How often does your PE teacher encourage everyone in class, not just the kids who are good at sports?

Family Members/ Other Adults/Programs

11) In what ways, if any, do your parents talk to you about how to treat your classmates? What kinds of things do they tell you?

12) What do your parents think about PE? How do you know?

13) Here's a scenario: Let's say that during PE one day, you get in trouble for being mean or pushing someone down for no reason. If your PE teacher calls your house to tell a parent, how do you think they would react? Explain. What if you were the one that was pushed down? How would they react to that news?

14) If someone is mean to you in any way during PE (hitting you, calling you names, leaving you out of a game), which family members or other adults, if any, do you tell (parents, brother, sister, teachers)? If you do talk to a family member or adult, in what way do they try to help you?

15) If you and/or your group of friends were mean to someone during PE, which family members or other adults, if any, do you tell? In what way do they try to help you?

16) What, if any, school programs are in place that encourage students to be kind to each other? Explain why you feel the program either works or does not work.

Peers

17) What do your friends think about PE? How would you describe their experiences in PE?

18) Describe a time, if this has happened, when a friend was being bullied in PE. What did you do?

19) How do you think your classmates would react if they saw someone push you down for no reason during PE class? How would your classmates react if they saw you push someone down for no reason during PE class?

20) If someone is mean to you in PE (hitting you, calling you names, leaving you out of a game) which friends or classmates do you tell, if any? In what way do they try to help you? Potential probe: (How does it make you feel to talk to them about it?)

21) When, if ever, have your friends encouraged you to be mean (hitting someone, leaving someone out of a game) to another student or group of students? What happened?

Bullying

- 22) Show student a visual representation of the physical spaces associated with their PE class (locker room, gym, fitness room, etc.) Use this marker to indicate where most of the bullying in PE happens.
- 23) Do you think that bullying is a problem in your PE class? Explain.
- 24) Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your bullying experiences in PE?

Appendix B

Teacher Interview Guide I

Interviewer: My name is Jamie O'Connor and I am a student at the University of Illinois. Today I am here to talk about your perceptions of bullying in physical education. Is it ok if I audiotape our interview? Your answers will be kept confidential and will be used for professional presentations and publications. While the tape is transcribed, your name will be changed to something fictitious. During the interview, if there is a question you don't want to answer because it makes you feel uncomfortable, you don't have to. Also, if there is a question you would like me to clarify, just let me know. Ready to get started?

Perception of Bullying

1) When you think of the word bullying, what behaviors come to mind? Describe to what extent you feel that bullying is a normal or abnormal part of growing up.

Programs/Class Climate

2) What school program(s), if any, are in place that attempt to deter students from bullying one another? Explain to what extent you perceive those program(s) work or do not work. How do you feel about the program(s)?

3) To what extent do you perceive that bullying is a problem in your sixth grade physical education classes?

4) How do you attempt to promote a positive class atmosphere? What, if any, class policies do you have pertaining to how students treat each other in class? How are those policies enforced?

Students Along the Bullying Continuum

5) When you hear the word *bully* with regard to your sixth grade physical education classes, what students come to mind? How do they bully other students? How do the male bullies differ from the female bullies? To what extent do the bullies participate in class?

6) When you hear the word *victim* with regard to your sixth grade physical education classes, what students come to mind? How are they treated? How do the male victims differ from the female victims? To what extent do the victims participate in class?

Bullying Within Physical Education Class/Locker Room

7) Describe a time, if this has ever happened, when you felt like a student's actions lead to his/her victimization. Explain.

8) Describe a time, if this has happened, when a student or group of students didn't want someone to join their group. What happened? How did you handle it?

9) Describe a time, if this happened, when a student or group of students laughed at someone in what you thought was an inappropriate way. What happened? How did you handle it?

10) Describe a time, if this has happened, when a student or group of students were physically aggressive with another student. Where did it happen? How did you handle it?

11) How is locker room supervision handled for your sixth grade classes? What incidences of bullying, if any, have occurred in the locker rooms?

12) To what extent do sixth grade students report bullying behaviors to you? Describe a time, if this has happened, when you've encouraged students to handle a bullying episode on their own.

13) Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about bullying in your sixth grade physical education classes?

Appendix C

Teacher Interview Guide II

- 1) Last week you were given a copy of the transcript from your first formal interview with me. Now that you've had a chance to look it over, is there anything you would like to clarify?
- 2) Students identified the gym, the locker rooms and the outdoor area as the most prominent locations for bullying in PE. What's your reaction to that?
- 3) To what extent do you feel like certain activities or sports lead to more aggressive, or bullying-like behaviors in PE? An observation: Overwhelmingly, students seem to really enjoy dodgeball. But it also seems to be an activity that gets them really charged up and I've even heard them yelling from the bleachers to target specific students.
- 4) To what extent do you feel scared or uncertain about handling bullying in sixth grade PE?
- 5) What barriers do you perceive with regard to maintaining a safe environment for your sixth grade students? What makes it tough to fight bullying?
- 6) To what extent do you ever feel like that you let certain things slide with regard to bullying because maybe it's difficult to fight every battle?
- 7) Is there anything you would change to help curb bullying in sixth grade PE?
- 8) Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about bullying in sixth grade PE?